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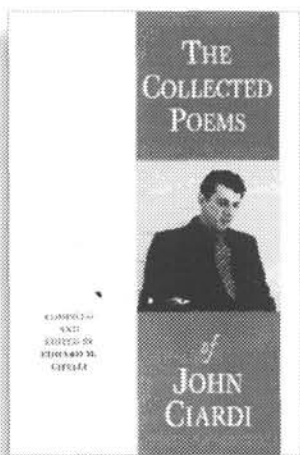
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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

SONYA RUDIKOFF (1927-1997), for twenty years an Advisory Editor of *The Hudson Review*, died in Princeton, New Jersey on April 25. Rudikoff's first publication in *The Hudson Review* (and her first anywhere), "Notes on Paul Klee," appeared in our Spring 1950 issue. She went on to become a frequent contributor over the years, specializing in art, psychology, sociology, and the lives and writings of notable nineteenth- and twentieth-century women. Her last contribution to our pages, her twenty-third, appears in the current issue. In 1977, Rudikoff was appointed an Advisory Editor of *The Hudson Review*, and she was still serving in this capacity at the time of her death. Her conscientious readings of the manuscripts that were sent to her, and her painstaking and penetrating criticisms—always clearly and succinctly expressed—were of inestimable value to the Editors, and in many cases to the authors themselves. Sonya Rudikoff was a critic of wide range and formidable intelligence; she was also a warm, generous, large-spirited woman and a dedicated colleague and friend. She will be sorely missed.

Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors:

For the sake of historical accuracy, a few items in Robert Phillips' excellent appraisal of the anthology, *Rebel Angels*, entitled "Assessing the New Formalism (So Called)" (*The Hudson Review*, Vol. L, No. 1, Spring 1997), should be set right.

That is, what seems to have become the now nearly legendary meeting of Frederick Feirstein, Frederick Turner and myself in Greenwich Village's Minetta Tavern took place six years earlier than Phillips places it—in 1981, not 1987. A fourth person, fiction writer Lori Negridge Allen—my wife—was also there. I had been corresponding with Frederick Turner for several years, but had not previously known Frederick Feirstein or his work.

That long evening, which I recall as rather balmy rather than dark and stormy, our conversation and concern focused on the stranglehold confessional free verse was beginning to have on contemporary poetry (and which continued until recently). Certainly we were interested in encouraging a revival of formalism and narrative and dramatic elements in poetry, but our primary concern was for the *content*, the subjects, the themes and visions of American verse.

"New Criticism" teaching techniques still held sway in most classrooms. They had turned the reading of poetry into the technical analysis of secret symbol and allusion codes centering on short lyrics. Confessionalism, we felt, was turning to narcissism. The lyric "I"-centered poem had become synonymous with poetry itself. And one reason poetry's audience was rapidly shrinking was the exclusion of themes, concerns and subjects other than the Self. The three of us had deep involvement with and interest in science, religion, the study of history and culture. We were seeking ways to incorporate these elements in the stories we tried to tell with our poetry.

Such involvement is why we never would have dreamed of giving the name "New Formalism" to the protean movement we'd begun to track and vowed that night to encourage. A better term, "Expansive Poetry," was later coined by poet Wade Newman—a term which, as Mr. Phillips correctly notes, embraces New Formalism and New Narrative. But "Expansive Poetry" makes it clear that New Formalism and New Narrative are subgenres of a larger movement and intent.

Mr. Phillips is certainly right concerning one of the things new about the new formalists: "the fusion of earthy subjects with the unearthly lyric impulse" (yet see Anthony Hecht's poems in *The Hard Hours*). Still, Mr. Phillips downplays the most interesting and promising aspect of New Formalism as originally conceived: how the use of slant rhyme and

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irregular meter—what Molly Peacock calls “low New Formalism”—encourages and enhances that use of natural speech patterns which forms the bridge between strict traditional prosody and free verse. This bridge is one of the elements Expansive Poetry (or New Formalism as originally conceived vs. Academic Formalism) encourages.

When Expansive Poetry and its subgenres of New Formalism and New Narrative began to be recognized, the differentiation point was one of consciousness, not of age. In 1981, I was 42, Feirstein was 41 and Turner was 38. Our understandings were shaped mainly by our coming to consciousness (traditionally defined by psychologists as at the age of seven) after World War II, and growing up in a world forever changed by knowledge of nuclear bombs, the Holocaust, space exploration, the technological revolution, pop culture, and a host of other elements. As Beat Generation members instinctively knew, these elements tended to make reactionary the “Establishment,” old formalism, ironic and classical allusion-rift Academic Formalism, and the “pure” classical prosody towards which New Formalism is now unfortunately being pulled backwards. We had no major quarrel with William Carlos Williams-influenced natural speech patterns. We admired the social consciousness of Beat Poetry. Under 30 throughout the sixties, we worried that the vapid “Me Generation” nature of the seventies would continue throughout the eighties.

As Mr. Phillips (who has himself written a good number of poems that could allow him to be called a “New Formalist,” save that he was born in 1938, and the anthology only includes poets born from 1940 onward) implies, decade points (1940, 1950, 1960, etc.) are useful sorting devices—but inaccurate. When the next “New Poets” anthology comes with a birth cut-off date of 1950, those born between 1940 and 1949 will be sloughed away and those older men and women born in 1950 and shortly thereafter will become magically “young” and “new” again.

Is this sour grapes because I was born less than five months before 1940? Yes.

Yet in 1988, when I edited the movement-defining issue of *Crosscurrents* on *Expansive Poetry: The New Formalism and the New Narrative*, I took a similar route, including no poets over 50. I have been similarly and I now realize correctly chastised.

The problem is that consciousness changes can come at any age (witness the work of Adrienne Rich, Louis Simpson, Miller Williams, for instance) and that a poet like Richard Frost, at 68, is every bit as “New Formalist” as the aging Dana Gioia (47), R.S. Gwynn (49), Molly Peacock (50) and Tom Disch (56).

My main point is that the effort to *expand* contemporary American poetry’s range and concerns beyond the self-centered and free-versed “I,” rather than shrink poetry’s techniques back to the formalist lyric, was what essentially occupied the minds and hearts of those three younger American poets who met that long-ago Minetta Tavern night.

Trumbull, Connecticut

Dick Allen

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Robert Phillips replies:

I am glad to see Dick Allen's generous letter concerning my essay/review on *Rebel Angels* and "The New Formalism." His letter seems to me an important document explaining motivations never before articulated.

And I thank Mr. Allen for correcting what was, in fact, a typographical error. The Minetta Tavern meeting was indeed in 1981, not 1987. I had checked the date in Allen's essay, "Transcending the Self" (*Crosscurrents*, 8, 2, 1989) and Feirstein and Turner's "Introduction" to *Expansive Poetry* (1989); it appears correctly in both. And then a gremlin intervened in my word-processing.

My apologies to Lori Negridge Allen for excluding her from my account of the meeting, but her name does not appear in either the Feirstein/Turner rendition, or that of her husband.

Dear Editors:

I'd like to correct an error in Bert Cardullo's film chronicle "Lands of the Free" in the Winter 1997 issue (Vol. XLIX, No. 4) of *The Hudson Review*. Cardullo quotes the phrase "fugue of faces" from Vernon Young and says that Young used the phrase to characterize Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930). It was not *Earth* that Young characterized by that phrase but Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). (See "Fugue of Faces: A Danish Film and Some Photographs," in Vernon Young, *On Film: Unpopular Essays on a Popular Art*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1972, pp. 44-50.) Perhaps Cardullo's confusion stems from my having quoted Young's phrase in my essay on *Earth*, which appeared in *The Hudson Review* (Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, Spring 1975). But I did not apply Young's phrase to *Earth*: "fugue of faces" applies to *The Passion of Joan of Arc* with specific aptness.

Bronx, New York

Gilberto Perez

Bert Cardullo replies:

Correction happily noted. Gilberto Perez is right: my confusion did stem from my reading of his seminal essay on *Earth* long before I came to Vernon Young's equally original piece on *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Thanks to Perez for pointing out the error, and for his own eloquent film criticism over the past thirty years.

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Comment:

Letter from Greece

DEAR H,

When I left the village in Mani sixteen years ago, having lived there for more than a year, one of my friends came by to say farewell. Her daughter had given Greek lessons to my first wife and me. We had eaten meals at her house and had come to know her family. Now that we were leaving, she said, "*Tha mas xechásete*"—"You will forget us." I promised her that I never would, and hardly a day of my life has passed since then when I have not thought of her and others in the village.

Now I am back in Greece. Much is new or changed, but underlying nearly every landscape I experience are pools of memory. People ask me to explain what happened, why I was absent so many years. I answer, "*Megáli istoría*," which in this case means "Long story," and wave a hand to indicate that they probably do not have time for another *Odyssey*.

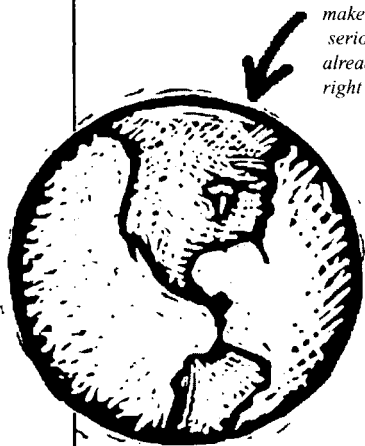
When I first arrived in January—I'm here on a Fulbright Fellowship to pursue my own writing and translation projects—I stayed for three weeks with friends in Glyfada, a prosperous suburb south of Athens, and formerly the site of an American military base. It was a side of Greece I had never seen before, where traditional life seemed on the surface to have been entirely overrun, not by tourism, but by another kind of global commerce. My hosts were originally from Corfu, and hence were more Western than Eastern in their outlook. Yet they are Greek, or a part of the many varieties of what being Greek can mean. When I took my temporary leave of them to move out to the island of Aegina, where I now write, the father gave me a traditional kiss on both cheeks, saying, "*Tha se thymómaste pánta*"—"We will remember you always." I was deeply touched by this and felt that his words signified the timeless universality of journeys, the tenuousness of our lives and the importance of our connections to other people.

In February I went back to the village in Mani, a rugged part of the southern Peloponnesos cut off from the rest of Greece by the Taygetos Mountains, for a brief visit. I will say more about this before I finish my letter, but my first reactions were rather sad—noting what tourism had wrought in the way of new houses, restaurants and roads. The woman who had worried that I would forget her now only dimly remembered me. Her children prospered far away in Athens or England. She served me coffee in her house, confessing that so many foreigners came and went it was hard to tell them apart. To make matters worse, many people I had hoped to see were dead or away on visits. But what did I expect?

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I had not kept in touch with them in all those years. Indeed, circumstances had caused me to think that I would never see them again. The village had its life, I mine, as is only just, and I was learning the place of the foreigner or guest in Greece. An Englishwoman I met in a new cafe said to me, as if it should have been obvious, "It's always a mistake, you know. To go back. You never, ever do it."

Nevertheless, I walked to the place called Kalamitsi, where I had lived for five months in a tiny stone house. The house was still there, but the gate was locked and I had to climb over it to see the land again, with its cypresses, mulberries, figs and olives. My memories had no meaning for those who had stayed on in the village, living the life there, tending the births and deaths, celebrating the marriages, fighting through the elections. The village had its own currents, an ancient vitality untouched by the surface changes I observed, just as nature had taken its course and overgrown much of the land, leaving no sign of my old vegetable garden. I was passing through, like so many others who wrestle with their love of Greece.

Ironically, I am here while "The Glory of Byzantium" is at the Metropolitan in New York. But there is plenty of glory here, especially in the infinite fascination of the language. One of the world's recent news stories, for example, concerns *klonopoïsi*, cloning, a word combining *klónos*—twig or offshoot—with *poïsi*, which can mean poetry, making, construction, fabrication, etc. A recent headline in *To Vima* reads: «*Klonismós*» *tis politikís! ta próvata, o laós, ta tzákia kai to méllon* (Cloning of politics! the sheep, the people, the political dynasties and the future). There is an additional pun on the spelling of *Klonismós*, suggesting a shaky foundation. Below it are two photos, one of Dolly the lamb, another of Kostas Karamanlis, nephew and namesake of the famous conservative leader, who has since been chosen to lead his uncle's political party, New Democracy.

Then there are the other headlines about strikes, the terrible events in Albania, the arguments with Turkey over Cyprus—all of which I observe as an outsider. I don't even have to deal with what one political cartoon in *Ta Néa* called The Labyrinth of Real Estate Taxes. Any judgments I make are those of a foreigner; I'm chastened by the fact that Patricia Storace's good book, *Dinner with Persephone*, has been received in some quarters as if it were only critical of Greece, in others as too romantic, and in still others as too obsessed with life on the periphery of Greek culture. Greeks can argue about Greece, I am told, but outsiders had better beware.

I make mistakes with the language which, so far, have been more amusing than dangerous. Once I confused the word for Muse (*Moúsa*) with the word for beard (*moísi*). I thought a friend was telling me that "Every poet must have a beard," and I hastened to inform him that, on the contrary, there were many great women poets who presumably were not bearded. It took us some time to sort that one out.

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Soon after I arrived I was invited to lecture to Fulbright alumni in Thessaloniki at their celebration of the New Year. I spoke, mostly in English, about translation as collaboration (*synergasia*—a word with unfortunate connotations from the centuries of Ottoman domination, as well as World War II, the Greek Civil War and the dictatorship my country so foolishly supported). It concerned work I have done with Yiorgos Chouliaras, a Greek writer living in New York, on translations of his poetry. Yiorgos was born and raised in Thessaloniki, that wonderfully complex northern city, and now I know I must go back to see more of it.

Thessaloniki has been designated the Cultural Capital of Europe for 1997, a concept originated by the late actress and government minister, Melina Mercouri (whose performance in the film *Stella* is a real landmark of Greek cinema). The schedule of events—music, plays, art exhibits, etc.—is extremely ambitious, celebrating not only Greece's vital cultural life but works from around the world. Critics accuse the civic organizers of corruption, getting too late a start and other offenses, but when I was there, just before the opening ceremonies, things looked promising. The Artistic Director, Panos Theodoridis, is himself an author of note. Visiting the Cultural Capital's offices in a well-preserved old mansion, I conversed with one of his chief lieutenants, Dimitris Kalokyris, a prolific poet and artist, sometimes called "The Borges of Greece" for his labyrinthine wit and assimilation of postmodern influences. Chouliaras and Kalokyris are part of a generation of writers who came of age in the time of the Junta. Their group published the influential journals *Tram* and *Chártis*. When I saw him, Kalokyris commanded an army of attractive young people manning computers, designing publicity for various events. The excitement and tension of complex operations were palpable, but Kalokyris seemed calm, if overworked, viewing it all with deadpan humor and grace.

I noticed in the schedule that the two American poets invited to Thessaloniki were John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch. Perhaps Kalokyris saw me wince that my country should be represented by writers I consider relatively dull. He said he understood that writers with large reputations were not always the best, but that practical matters—the lure of the known—had to be considered. I assured him that such things also happened in America, yet I still wonder that these worn-out institutions stand for the innovation and freedom we Americans supposedly embody. Allen Ginsberg continues to be the best-known American poet in Europe.

But how many Greek writers are known in America? Alexandros Papadiamantis, the great nineteenth-century fiction writer, has been translated by Peter Levi and Elizabeth Constantinides, but the bulk of his work has yet to be seen in English (I'm told that new translations by many hands will be published by Denise Harvey). Cavafy is known, of course, as one of the most important of all modern poets in any language. Translators like Edmund Keeley and the late Philip Sherrard

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have also done much to disseminate the great work of Seferis and Elytis among readers of English. Whom else could we list? Nikos Kazantzakis, Yiannis Ritsos, Vassilis Vassilikos, best known for his novel *Z*. Perhaps others. But I am struck time and again by how little modern Greek literature has been translated and made available in America (European countries seem to be doing a better job of it). I've just seen a newspaper supplement on the work of the Thessaloniki writer and painter Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis (1908–1993), known for his blending of surrealism and Orthodox Christianity. Though he has been translated, I had never heard of him. Admittedly, I'm very much an amateur in the field of Greek literature, but I enjoy the subject enough to be appalled by my ignorance of it. Who else ought to be better known: Jenny Mastoraki, Eleni Vakalo, Anastasis Vistonitis, Galateia Sarandi, Antonis Sourounis, Alexis Panselinos? The Kedros publishing house has a new series of Greek novels in translation, including *The Mission Box* by Aris Alexandrou (1921–1978), who was also a translator of Russian literature into Greek. Kedros promises a poetry series in the future, but the real test will be the distribution of these books abroad. How many other Greek writers are relatively unknown to English readers, including some who, like Nanos Valaoritis, have written both prose and verse? Who among them, if anyone, might achieve the global stature of Odysseus Elytis, Greece's second Nobel laureate, who died in March of 1996?

All this is to say nothing of the variety of plays staged in Athens, especially during its winter season. Because Greeks tend to prefer their entrepreneurial independence, actors often start their own theatre companies—just as it sometimes seems that no family in Greece is without its own shop. As a result, Athens enjoys what must be one of the richest theatre seasons in the world; scores of productions of classical and modern plays are mounted, along with new plays by Greeks like Takis Theodoropoulos, so that only the most passionate theatregoers could keep up with them.

One night in Athens I went with two friends, Nikos Mavrommatis and Ourania Lyka, to hear Patrick Leigh Fermor lecture on travel. We then hoofed it through Kolonaki—Nikos singing “Viva Las Vegas” at the top of his lungs—to hear thirty poets reading poems of Elytis in his memory, accompanied by the fine pianist Dora Bakopoulou. One sensed the usual rivalries among the poets, but also the gravity of the tribute, which was broadcast on national radio's “Third Program.” Clearly, there is a lot going on in Greece.

On Aegina I rent a small stone bungalow from the poet and translator, Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke (who read with particular poise and passion at the Elytis tribute). She is both a serious artist and the devoted friend of a very large number of people. In person she is hilarious, combative, censorious and warm-hearted almost simultaneously. She is cosmopolitan and quintessentially Greek, her father's side of the family having once watered its land from the Scamander in

Asia Minor (the river Achilles turned red with Trojan blood), and her mother's deriving from Patras in the Peloponnesos, where Greek nationalists raised the rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in 1821. Katerina grew up in a highly cultured family, studied in Paris and Switzerland, has lived in England and taught in America (her husband, Rodney Rooke, is English). Some of her great compassion and humor are due to the fact that she survived a near-fatal illness in infancy; she has an intimate knowledge of pain and love, which she has written about in many memorable poems. She is utterly dismissive of the xenophobia one sometimes notices among Greeks, and her knowledge of English, French and Russian makes her an ideal translator.

Her latest translation, in fact, is a selection of Seamus Heaney's poetry called *Ta poiímata tou váltou* (Poems of the marsh or swamp), and she has fascinating things to say about the difficulties of translating Heaney's "bog" into Greek. One of her two prefaces is called "In the marshland of translation"—a place with which I, too, am slowly becoming familiar. The book is handsomely produced by her publisher, Kastaniotis, who will bring Heaney to Athens in celebration of the event. I have also been reading Katerina's new book of poems, *Oraía éremos i sárka* (The flesh is a beautiful desert), finding them powerful not only for their strong rhythms and tough, surprising images, but also for their lucid dramatic contexts, their careful accumulations of emotional power. Translations of Katerina's poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, and I have seen two translated collections, one from Wire Press, another from BOA Editions.

Katerina and Rodney are usually here (in the house her father rebuilt beside a pistachio plantation) on weekends, when I often join them for meals and conversation. Only a novelist could convey the polyglot wordplay crossing their kitchen table. I usually feel like a spectator at a verbal tennis match, trying to catch all the jokes whizzing by. Nothing delights her more than some subtle play on words, but I am also partial to the folk sayings she teaches me, like this one explaining the way people dodge responsibility: *Exo ap' to choró, pollá tragoidia léne*—"Outside of the dance, they sing a lot of songs." Or another which she calls one of the most beautiful of all Greek sayings: *O lógos sou me chórtase kai to psomí sou fátó*—"Your word so fills me up that you can keep your bread."

It seems that Greece shares much with other small countries like Ireland. Both have long histories and legacies of outside domination. Both countries—at least compared to the US—prize learning and poetry. The Irish had their hedge schools, the Greeks *to kryfó skoleiό*, the "hidden school" depicted on the new 200 drachma note, where we see a bearded Orthodox priest giving lessons to Greek children during the Turkish occupation. Books are often cherished—I have been shown small shelves of them in houses where older villagers are eager to prove that they can read. Because of Greece's precarious political history, people tend to be readers of newspapers and addicts of television news.

As in Ireland, there is a rich tradition of verbal improvisation. Katerina believes that the Protestant tradition in America emphasizes the silence of God, but insists that in Greece the world is still spoken into being.

At Katerina's birthday party on a sunny day in February, I met the writer and editor Dinos Siotis, who lived for years in America and Canada, where he was editor of Wire Press and ran a journal called *The Aegean Review*. Now based at the Ministry of Press in Athens, Siotis also edits a bi-monthly journal, *Révmata* (*Currents*) which contains not only Greek writing but work in translation from abroad (the magazine is sometimes criticized for its fashionable American influences). He is a witty man with a refreshing appetite for pop culture. After the party, we sat in Katerina's kitchen, watching a surreal television program that tried to match people sitting on a stage with callers from around the country. The program's naturally funny star, Annita Pania, was winning the ratings war among popular blondes on TV. In the background, young men lifted weights to demonstrate prowess to female viewers, or they showed off their singing and dancing. Katerina and Dinos laughed at the bad Greek spoken on the program, often mixed with English, and wondered aloud whether the Greek language could survive this onslaught. Later, Katerina said it made her feel like wrapping herself in the flag and jumping off the Acropolis.

When my wife, Anne, and I went back to the village in February, we stayed at the small hotel above a taverna owned and run by a wonderful woman named Lela who used to cook for Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor. Lela's husband, Petros, had taught me how to grow vegetables when I was their neighbor in Kalamitsi. On our first morning back in the village, Lela brought our breakfast to us, saying, "Today a good man died." She had been up all night at the vigil in the man's house; villagers have always handled such notable happenings themselves, because in the past they could not depend on help from the outside world. It was a rainy day, and I had meant to attend the funeral, but missed it when I drove south to another village to leave a message for friends I had lost touch with years ago. No one knew where my friends were now, and I seriously doubt that the notes I scribbled in the rain and left for the new owner of their house will ever find them.

But of course we lose touch. We all do. The villagers now preparing the dead man's body for the grave would probably scoff at my sentimentality. Going back to the village, what struck me most was not only what had changed in the way of houses and roads, but how much had survived in the stubborn will of the people, the lifelong argument and celebration. The ancient city on the acropolis behind the village was mentioned in the *Iliad* as one of the offerings to Achilles if he would come out of his tent and fight; further down, the medieval village abuts the modern one beside the sea. The bloodlines of some of these families, in a region

relatively untouched by the Ottomans, must go back thousands of years. It is impossible to overstate the tenacity of such heritage.

But there was another encounter that I must tell you about before I close. My former neighbors, the Leigh Fermors, had us to lunch in the beautiful villa they designed and built some time ago. Paddy is a legend in Greece, having lived here much of his life and written about it as well as anyone has in English. Their generosity to me when I was a boy in a nearby hut is something I have never forgotten, nor have I forgotten the writers and artists I met in or near their home—some of Bruce Chatwin's ashes are now buried on a hill not far away. "They're all dead now," said Joan when I mentioned these friends, but she and Paddy have, even in their eighties, a youthful vitality and abiding interest in the world.

Before leaving the village, we met them for another lunch at Lela's. Known for his enthusiastic performances of Greek songs, Paddy now regaled us with his rendition of an old Marlene Dietrich number—which he sang *backwards*. We were seated in the shade outside the taverna (it had stopped raining), the sea-washed rocks just below us. We talked about the strange distortions memory creates, about exotic meals we had eaten—he and Joan won that prize with iguana in El Salvador. We talked about books as always, about odd things that crop up in all cultures. "Hair of the dog," I said, for some reason thinking of the folk remedy for a hangover. "How would you convey that in Greek?"

"*Skýli pou se dágkose*," Paddy replied, "*vále ap' to mallí tou*. Dog that has bitten you, pour in some of its fur." It was a Cretan saying he had recorded in his book, *Mani*, and he wrote it down for me. I intend never to lose that scrap of paper.

Aegina

DAVID MASON

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LOUIS SIMPSON

The Blue Coast

1

Peter sat in the garden
with Priscilla, Richard's wife.

"Are you always so serious?"
she said. "Talk about me.

How old would you say I am?"
"Twenty."

She laughed
and patted him on the knee.

2

Richard's friend Jack came by
and they all went to Fréjus
for dinner. Richard drove.
Jack sat beside him, Priscilla
with Peter in the back.

Jack and Richard reminisced.
The other ranks were splendid,
but the Colonel, what an ass.
In the dark thrown together
Peter and Priscilla kissed.

3

Richard said to Priscilla,
“Malcolm is driving down.”
“Malcolm?” Peter said. “Who’s he?”
“An old friend,” said Priscilla.

Malcolm arrived. He told them
how bad things in England were.
Something under the Bentley wanted
adjusting. His legs stuck out,

Priscilla squatted in shorts,
handing him the pliers or wrench.

4

Malcolm and Priscilla
drove over to Cannes
and didn’t get back
until four in the morning.

The next day Malcolm left,
disappearing in a cloud of dust.
He had to leave too, Peter said.
Tomorrow. “Why so sudden?”

“He’s angry at me,” said Priscilla.
“Oh is he?” Richard said.

5

Peter looked back from the train
at the Lavandou: rows of vines,
naked as mandrakes in April.

He unwrapped the novel Richard
had given him for his journey:
Sentimental Education.

“He’s asleep”

The phone was ringing.
He looked at his watch.
2:07 a.m.

A voice said, “He’s asleep.”
A woman’s voice. It spoke again:
“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Then, “Marty?”
He said, “This isn’t Marty.”
Then a hum. She had hung up.

His wife was awake. “Who was it?”
He said, “A wrong number,”
and she went back to sleep.

In the morning he pondered
the guests who were at breakfast
at the tables and in the booths.

Two were absorbed in the *Times*.
They had nothing to say to each other
apparently. Nothing at all.

Another couple, obviously married . . .
One would say something
and the other would nod.

This had been going on for years . . .
every thought they expressed
familiar and understood.

Or was it the one with style
having breakfast all by herself,
“he” being still asleep?

There was no way of knowing.
It could have been any of the women
in the room, except his wife.

Out on the Island

1

A Nonconforming Lot

So you bought the old place.
You ought to have talked to us.

It's on a nonconforming lot.
Anything you want to do,

you want to put in a window,
you have to ask permission,

and the village likes to say no.

2

The Repairman's Story

They were on the Verrazano
when "the truck took a wrong turn."

They found themselves on the island,
so they just kept going.

The monkey? Some people are put off,
but there's nothing like a monkey

on the roof. It's good for business.

3

Sanctuary Road

There's nothing much to see,
and not much to discuss:

the mice running in the wall.
But every afternoon at three

we stand beside the road
waiting for the school bus,

the children, the point of it all.

Country Doctor

In New York, London, or Paris,
doctors have splendid offices.
It is different where we live.
You approach, through a waiting room
that is small, the doctor's office
that is even smaller still.
He is dying, to put it in a nutshell.

Head bowed over his desk
he listens to your pain,
liver or back. Wrapping the tourniquet
around your arm, he trembles
with the effort. Head bent
to your heart . . . His hand shakes
as he writes the prescription.

Some words from the Greek perhaps.

When Rosalind Was a Child

When Rosalind was a child
she was coming home one night

and passed the church. It was lighted.
She stopped a while to stare.

Suddenly there was a shout:
"Christ has died.

Christ is risen.
Christ will come again!"

Was she frightened? Fascinated?
What was it like, being a Jew?

She did not say, but sat gazing
in the past, like a child again.

*

She was wakened by a murmur
of voices. When she looked

there were soldiers in the street,
and a man walking with them

with chains on his hands and feet.
People said, from the next village . . .

Someone had denounced him.
They said that he had an enemy,

a man who wanted his land,
and now he was going to Siberia.

That was all they would say.
He had been denounced. That was all.

The Children's Choir

Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

—Verlaine

The voices of the children
singing in the cupola
still sing every Sunday.

A woman conducts them
with fingers pointing up.
She tugs at her earlobe.

I wouldn't be surprised
if the choir were to rise
and fly through a window.

It's too beautiful for words.
But one of the children
yawns a round O.

And so we are spared
the opening of the sky
and the end of the world.

DANIEL HOFFMAN

Emily Dickinson: The Heft of Cathedral Tunes

It is little remarked and less explained by those who acknowledge Emily Dickinson's stunning originality that in respect of two fundamental aspects of versing she is surprisingly old-fashioned, determinedly self-limited to a conventional prosody. I speak of her almost constant commitment to the basic stanza—quatrains of lines alternately four and three beats long, rhymed *abab*—of the Moody & Sankey hymnal. Given that paradox is the characteristic development of her poems, it seems anomalous that she never attempted the three traditional forms best designed for its embodiment: the heroic couplet, any of the intricate stanzas of metaphysical lyrics, or the Petrarchan sonnet. She almost never writes a line as long as pentameter. Annie Finch, in *The Ghost of Meter* (1993), maintains that Dickinson, like Blake, chose “rough fourteeners,” since “The hymn stanza and fourteener carried much less authority than iambic pentameter”; Blake’s “one-line adaptation of . . . the ballad or hymn stanza”—the literary expression of the lower social classes—was, for Dickinson, a metrical rejection of the poetry of tradition. It would seem she found nothing formal she could borrow from her voluminous readings in the canonical English poets or in her American contemporaries.

Among them, only Whitman is as determinedly contrarian in his versing. For him, the expansiveness of anaphoric structure with its all-inclusive possibilities proved the perfect expression of his sensibility. But for Dickinson, the tight quatrains of the hymnal offered tiny caskets in which to hoard the precious intensities of her metaphors. If Dickinson adopted common measure as a conscious rejection of the hegemony of iambic pentameter in English versing, she used this metrical and formal convention in ways deeply subversive of its own associations. Like any stanzaic convention, the hymnal quatrain embodies for its

readers the expectation that in each present instance it will be employed as it has traditionally been used. No doubt Dickinson was conscious of that expectation—in herself as well as in any putative reader—when she wrote this poem:

Far from Love the Heavenly Father
 Leads the Chosen Child,
 Oftener through Realm of Briar
 Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
 Than the Hand of Friend
 Guides the Little One predestined
 To the Native Land.

(1021)

—an anti-hymn, a bold confutation of the promised comforts of faith.

Without attention to Dickinson's choice of stanza, Elisa New, in her searching study *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry*, a scrupulous reading of the religious implications of some twenty key poems, emphasizes Dickinson's intellectual boldness, her independence of the dominant Emersonian hubristic optimism.

Writing against the grain of a theological culture rationalizing itself according to Victorian convention, Dickinson's theological lyrics find in a mystical contemplation of the Divine a point outside the genteel exercise of Christianity. . . . Poems can give form to a species of faith inexpressible in discursive philosophy.

The form in which Dickinson's poems give voice to her unorthodox faith, I suggest, is the hymnal stanza, which she used because most of her poems are conceived of as hymns. Her use of this Common Measure stanza undermines its conventional assumptions of reinforcing piety in ways that parallel the practices of Hawthorne and Melville, like her inheritors of a theocracy in decay, who subverted the pious sureties of allegory into the plural richness and ambiguities of symbolism.

But what, then, is one to make of Susan Howe's slash-and-burn attack, in *The Birth-Mark* (1993), on the hegemonic tyranny of Dickinson's modern male editors, Thomas H. Johnson (variorum *Poems*) and R. W. Franklin (*The Manuscript Books*), who, ignoring the broken lineation of the poems written on various-sized scraps of paper, regularized them into Common Meter stanzas? This problem disappears when the poems are read aloud. Ms. Howe, herself an experimental post-modernist poet, has imposed the spatial aesthetic of modernist poetics upon poems written nearly a century before Pound, cummings, et al. responded to Cubism and made the appearance of the poem on the page as much, or more, significant to its meaning than how it sounds to the ear: the displacement in the twentieth century of an earlier oral tradition by a print culture.

The problem of reading Dickinson has always been how to adjust our views to hers. Her first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, faced with the daunting task of presenting to a genteel Victorian American public the idiosyncratic effusions of an eccentric recluse, attempted instead to adjust her work to their measure. Introducing her poems in advance of her first posthumous volume, Higginson wrote (in *The Christian Union*, 25 September 1890) that her poems were "wayward and unconventional in the last degree; defiant of form, measure, rhyme, even grammar; she had yet an exacting standard of her own, and would wait many days for a word that satisfied." Higginson, a man of probity and courage, colonel of a Negro regiment in the Civil War, was not so bold in matters aesthetic—indeed, he embodied the genteel taste of the leading magazines. That is why Dickinson sought his response to her poems, casting herself as his "Scholar," in her curiosity to see how a representative of the reigning aesthetic would view what she had written. "Her verses," Higginson wrote, "are in most cases like poetry plucked up by the roots; we have them with earth, stones, and dew adhering, and must accept them as they are."

But did he do so? As is well known, Higginson and Todd arranged the poems under moralistic and sentimental headings—"Life," "Nature," "Love," "Death"—and did not hesitate to regularize her off-rhymes, at whatever cost to the muscularity and

intellectual force of her verse. Let one instance stand as indicative of their well-intentioned but destructive manipulations:

There's a certain slant of light
 Winter afternoons
 That oppresses, like the weight
 Of cathedral tunes . . .

I remember first reading this poem while in high school, in Conrad Aiken's Modern Library anthology of American poetry, and being bowled over by it. Still, how poor is the executive metaphor of the stanza, compared to what Emily Dickinson actually wrote, as we learned in 1955 from Thomas H. Johnson's variorum edition:

There's a certain Slant of light,
 Winter afternoons –
 That oppresses, like the Heft
 Of Cathedral Tunes –

Consider the distinction between *Heft* and *weight*, the latter substituted both to make a closer assonance with *light* and to rid the poem of the very “earth, stones, and dew adhering” that Higginson noticed in his article. For *Heft* suggests a coarse physical effort, as in hoisting a bale of hay or a filled milk can onto a cart in a barnyard, while at the same time, along with the physical effort required to handle heaviness, the word embodies the successful act of lifting. It is this oxymoron that gives the image its synergy, its power. The expected surge from the slant of light bears an unexpected burden—as is true also of cathedral tunes. For Dickinson, hymns are not merely uplifting; they weigh down on us while sustaining the soul. Both wintry light and cathedral tunes oppress while upraising the perceiver, requiring effort both physical and spiritual. All this rich plurality of meaning is amputated when, for decorum's sake, *weight* replaces *Heft* in the poem.

Dickinson, of course, couldn't foresee what Colonel Higginson and Mrs. Todd after her death would do to the poems in her manuscript fascicles. When Higginson suggested, on first reading her poems in 1862, that she delay publishing them, she assented,

“that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin —.” Indeed, when her friend Helen Hunt Jackson persuaded her to insert a poem anonymously in an anthology (most reviewers attributed it to Emerson), Dickinson did not follow up, ignoring the publisher’s offer to issue a volume of her work. Except for the few friends and neighbors to whom she showed or sent her poems, it seems probable that she wrote nearly all of her 1,775 poems for herself alone, with no thought of publication.

Why would one write so many poems over more than thirty years without expectation of readers, publication, recognition? There is at least one parallel case in American poetry: Edward Taylor, who died in 1729, 101 years before Emily Dickinson was born, wrote a body of the most accomplished metaphysical lyrics in the Colonies, but published none. It is thought he refrained from exposing to his orthodox Puritan congregation the sensuousness of his intricate style, modelled on the poetry of Donne and Crashaw. The question remains, why then did he write so much? For him, and for Dickinson, too, writing poems was the chosen form of the compulsive Puritan habit of journalling. As Perry Miller has reminded us, “almost every puritan kept a diary . . . because he needed a strict accounting of God’s dealings with him.” This vital impulse, born of covenant theology and the psychological strain of enduring a direct relationship with the Deity absent intervention by a hierarchical clergy, continued, even as religious certainty waned, into Dickinson’s time of half-covenants and the breakdown of Puritan theocracy into Congregational, Unitarian, and Transcendental seekings amid doubts. The diarizing impulse survives in the journals of Emerson and Thoreau, and, as with Taylor a century and a half before her, it was the force that both impelled Emily Dickinson’s versing and made her content to write for the most part for herself alone. Since her poems are her reckoning with God, with Death, with Immortality, Infinity, and Eternity, as manifested through the daily experiences of nature, of human emotions, of spiritual seekings by an analytical intellect, she is unremitting—as Higginson noted—in her searches for the inimitable word by which to embody the truths she sought.

Dickinson’s idiosyncrasies—the seeming eccentricity of her reclusive life; the capricious capitalization, slapdash punctuation,

off-rhymes, and peculiar grammar of her manuscripts; as well as the powerful compression of her best poems and the bold independence of her thought—all these factors have offered much ground for speculation. Many of her readers and critics have inclined either to explain away her nonconformities as versions of the familiar, or to seize upon her original qualities as reflections of themselves. The latest mailing from an Amherst bookshop specializing in marketing works on the local genius lists nine biographies and thirty-five studies of Dickinson's work. Among them we find many Emily Dickinsons: the village recluse, the celebrant of nature, the rejected lover of one or another clergyman, the lesbian lover of one or another neighboring woman, the Transcendentalist, the Romantic, the Modernist or postmodernist poet, the rebel against Victorian conformity, the feminist warrior casting off male tyranny in her poems subversive of social order. Critics choose poems by no means among her best to demonstrate the teleology their interpretations impose on her work.

For instance, in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988), David Reynolds finds Dickinson's characteristic metaphor to be that of the volcano. This was "one of the commonest images in American women's writing," an image "for which she frequently discovered new poetic applications" linking her achievement to a brace of banal novels about suffering women by female writers of limited talent.

For Harold Bloom, on the other hand, in *The Western Canon* (1994), in Dickinson "We confront, at the height of her powers, the best mind to appear among Western poets in nearly four centuries." Her poem, "The Tint I cannot take – is best –" (Johnson no. 627) he compares to Whitman's "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd" as "the height of American poetry and, with Whitman's poem, the authentic American sublime." As for Dickinson's sublime, as long ago as in his biography *Emily Dickinson* (1951), Richard Chase identified two modes in which Dickinson interpreted nature. One was "as an outward show of gay and delicate objects with more or less symbolic value," a mode whose stylistic expression he termed "rococo." On the other hand, nature seen "as hostile and awe-inspiring power" Dickinson expressed as "the sublime." While Bloom presents Dickinson as a gnostic philosopher (a reading reinforced by Elisa New), his

choice of poem 627 appears determined by his need to demonstrate the content of her thought rather than the power of her writing.

In the poem Bloom offers as “the height . . . of the American sublime,” Dickinson adverts to an impression, a feeling of wonder that recurs in several other poems. I have cited this expression of the sublime in the opening stanza of “There’s a certain Slant of light.” In “The Tint I cannot take – is best –” the image appears in a rather different guise:

The Moments of Dominion
That happen on the Soul
And leave it with a Discontent
Too exquisite – to tell –

The eager look – on Landscapes –
As if they just repressed
Some Secret – that was pushing
Like Chariots – in the Vest –

The Pleading of the Summer –
That other Prank – of Snow –
That Cushions Mystery with Tulle
For fear the Squirrels – know.

This rendition of the feeling “with a Discontent / Too exquisite,” and mystery cushioned “with Tulle” manifests her rococo style, not the sublime. Further, in the confused metaphor of “Some Secret – that was pushing / Like Chariots – in the Vest –,” it’s hard to see how the Vest, evidently the outer appearance of nature, could contain chariots, or how this image represents “Some Secret” repressed by “The eager look – on Landscapes.” The overelaborated fancifulness of these medial stanzas does not approach the sublimity of “There’s a certain Slant of light,” or the powerful compression of the concluding lines of “Further in Summer than the Birds” (1068): “Yet a Druidic Difference / Enhances Nature now.” Nor does the image in the stanzas above from “The Tint I cannot take” match the intensity of poem 764:

Presentiment – is that long Shadow – on the Lawn –
 Indicative that Suns go down –

The Notice to the startled Grass
 That Darkness – is about to pass –

Here Nature is, mysteriously, as sentient as the poet herself, who, merging her consciousness into the diurnal round, participates in its ritual progression. No mention here of “Prank,” of “Tulle,” or of “fear the Squirrels – know.”

Nearly half a century after Johnson’s variorum revealed Dickinson’s idiosyncrasies do we yet know what to make of her peculiar punctuation, capitalizing, grammar? Contemporary critics enroll these stylistic signatures as weapons in Dickinson’s struggles against being smothered by linguistic and poetic conventions. “Consider something so apparently trivial as Dickinson’s habit of employing dashes instead of other, more usual marks of punctuation,” writes Cynthia Griffen Wolff in *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (1993):

For generations there have been readers who want to discover a “grand scheme” that can decode the unruly verse and subdue it to regulation, and it is just such rule-bound limitation that Emily Dickinson is seeking to elude. Thus her dashes consistently subvert the tidy relationships that commas and semicolons and the like would impose.

And, in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Susan Howe proposed that

Conventional punctuation was abolished . . . to subtract arbitrary authority. Dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem. Hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing. Empirical domain of revolution and revaluation where words are in danger, dissolving . . . on Mutability certain.

And Wolff instances, as “a profound use of this device,” in “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain,” Dickinson’s “masterful manipulation of dashes in the last line that makes the superb uncertainty of [the poem’s] conclusion.”

No doubt about it, that is the effect her dashes have on us. But are we projecting back over a century our present responses to what for Dickinson may not have been as subversive or as revolutionary as we think? It is well to recall that her very first recorded letter, sent to her brother, has almost no punctuation at all; six months later (in 1842, when she was twelve) she writes a school friend a letter punctuated only with dashes, a habit she soon outgrew but which recurred occasionally in her correspondence. In her early letters to Higginson, self-consciously presenting a persona to accompany her poems, the indeterminacy of dashes reappears.

But let us examine her dashing in its own context. In the February 1848 issue of *Graham's Magazine*, there appeared this comment on that punctuational form:

Every writer for the press, who has any sense of the accurate, must have been frequently mortified and vexed at the distortion of his sentences by the printer's now general substitution of a semi-colon, or comma, for the dash of the MS. The total or nearly total disuse of the latter point, has been brought about by the revulsion consequent upon its excessive employment about twenty years ago. The Byronic poets were *all* dash.

In this item in his "Marginalia," Poe goes on to prescribe the appropriate use of the dash—"this point represents *a second thought—an emendation*," assuredly his own practice in prose, as it was also that of Whitman as late as in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) and *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads* (1888).

It is evident that print culture, the rise of magazines and newspapers in the first half of the nineteenth century, tended to regularize grammatical practices. Insistence on uniform style was intensified in the latter half of the century by the schoolmarming of America. For Dickinson, the use of the dash—much more varied than Poe's restrictive dictum allowed—may well have expressed a psychological reversion to, or evocation of, a preadolescent state of mind or soul, a way of avoiding adulthood's constraints upon speculative thought by retaining an indeterminate punctuational form common in her youth.

We are now so accustomed to the peculiar appearance of her verse that to read her poems conventionally pointed, as in her *Selected Poems* edited by the English poet James Reeves (London,

1955), where the texts given in Johnson are regularized, is to sense, oddly, a loss. Yet it does not follow that all transcriptions of the variorum into print are faithful to Dickinson's practice. Inspection of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* shows that her dashes are inaccurately reproduced em dashes abutting the words they follow (as in The Library of America anthology, *American Poets: The Nineteenth Century*, or *The Columbia History*), when, in fact, they would be better represented by en dashes separated by a space from the words they follow and precede. I dwell on this nicety because our apprehension of the tempo and the tone of her poems does depend in part upon their appearance on the page. We are by now accustomed to the ways that Cummings, Pound, Williams, and Olson, among others, have made typographical idiosyncrasies tensors of meaning, and so cannot help but read Dickinson in the light of this practice. It is evident that she ignores the distinction between commas and semicolons by using her dashes *passim*—even, sometimes, at the ends of poems, concluding with a dash instead of a period. An en dash rather than an em dash, appropriately spaced, makes a telling difference in our perception of the tempo, the relationship of modifiers and subjects, and the sense of indeterminacy in the poems.

As for her capitalization, that too seems a reflection of an outmoded style. Her letters are filled with capitalized nouns. In her poems she commonly capitalizes all, or most, of her nouns, though with occasional inconsistencies. In "A light exists in Spring" (812), we find some nouns in upper, some in lower case, e.g., "At any other period –" and "Without the Formula of sound." In "Title divine – is mine" (1072), "God sends us Women" in line 7, but six lines further, *women* recurs in lower case. Since this poem is a strong questioning of women's submission, in marriage, in theology, were capitalization uniformly indicative of meaning or emphasis certainly *women* would begin with an upper-case W both times the word is used.

Subversively conventional in her commitment to Common Measure, idiosyncratically personal in her pointing and capitalization, it is in her rhyming that Emily Dickinson bursts free of traditional restraints. Almost single-handedly, in her isolated Amherst room, she expanded the palette of possible terminal

sound-linkage from exact rhyming to assonance, even dissonance. To take one familiar example, in "There's a certain Slant of light" she uses exact rhymes (*Afternoons/Tunes*, *scar/are Despair/Air*, *breath/Death*); assonantal matchings (glancingly in *gives us/difference*, *listens/Distance*); downright dissonance (*light/Heft*) and no rhymes at all (*Any/affliction*). English, as Auden somewhere remarks, is the language in which *womb* rhymes with *doom* and *tomb*—and precious little else, notably rhyme-poor compared to the Romance languages or to its own pre-modern form before the withering-away of the declensional endings that made Chaucer's rhymes so pleasing. Still, this paucity did not inhibit poets from the Elizabethan lyricists, Shakespeare, and Donne to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. Why, then, did Emily Dickinson feel that rhyme, as they practiced it, was inadequate to the needs of her verse?

Rhyme can be merely decorative, but good poets—certainly great ones—use it functionally. The pattern of rhymed lines of course establishes the form of the stanza, and end-rhymes make the terminal the most emphasized foot in the line. The recurrence of sound subliminally establishes a stronger bond between the rhymed words than between those and other words, or between any unrhymed words. So rhyme, skillfully used, contributes significantly to the reader's or hearer's total apprehension of the poem. To take an example from our most insistent rhymers, when, in "Israfel," Poe writes,

If I could dwell
Where Israfel
Hath dwelt, and he where I,
He might not sing so wildly well
A mortal melody,
While a bolder note than this might swell
From my lyre within the sky.

—his two rhymes, made to recur swiftly by the brevity of the lines, establish, indeed embody the music of the spheres which is the subject of his song. The theme requires perfect harmonies, and Poe provides them, rhyming with his two key characters, *Israfel* and *I*, and adds the further reenforcement of the rhyme on *sky*.

Dickinson, however she struggles to imagine it, knows that perfection cannot be achieved. Her rhymes and off-rhymes often embody the intellectual and emotional grappling with hard truths, the ambiguous vouchsafings of transcendence, that characterize her poetic mission—as well, of course, as her occasional intimations of joy. When revelation is hard to come by, she will not make it swell with perfect rhymes as from a lyre within the sky:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
 As if my Brain had split –
 I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –
 But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
 Unto the thought before –
 But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls – upon a Floor.

(937)

Here, dissonances of *Mind/Seam* and *join/Sound*—the key words in the poem—express the disjunction of thought that is her subject. The harshness of these pairs is posed against the regular rhymes in the other paired lines. (Wolff, citing this poem as an example of Dickinson's gendering of her experience, notes the womanly allusions to sewing and knitting, and further remarks the implied pun linking the balls of yarn with the nonconsecutive narrative of thought.)

For Dickinson, rhyme, like all the other elements of technique, is functional. Sound is an aspect of thematic development, the varying degrees of chiming, assonance, and dissonance establish subliminal and aural embodiments of meaning.

Feminist criticism has inevitably led to considerations of how Emily Dickinson conceived of herself as a poet, a traditionally masculine role. Her most recent biographer, Cynthia Griffen Wolff, writes (in *Columbia History*, pp. 132–33), that she must have been influenced by, and rebelled against, both Emerson's assumption, in "The Poet," of an inexorably male identity, and the

assertion in Poe's influential essay, "The Philosophy of Composition":

Poe had made a striking pronouncement about women and art; and the prescriptive force of this statement continues even today to exert tremendous power over the configuration of American culture. Poe declared that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover."

If you are Emily Dickinson—that is, if you are a woman who is also a poet—such a prescription presents immediate and obvious problems.

To cope with this daunting challenge—"The woman is literally dead. How, then, to empower her?"—Wolff proposes that Dickinson wrote "some of her most masterful poems . . . in which the speaker (often explicitly gendered female) has already died," thus transforming Poe's conception of "an extremity of female passivity to an ultimate form of feminine heroism in which the speaker explores the experiential 'reality' of death itself."

But is it likely that Dickinson is responding directly to Poe? For one thing, his reason for requiring a beautiful woman's death as the poetic subject is that this topic is productive of the most melancholy of emotions, grief, and therefore best suited to the evocation of Beauty. Dickinson's poems do not partake of this draconian sequence; the evocation of neither melancholy nor beauty is her inescapable concern. Besides, it is not very likely that she as a schoolgirl read Poe's essay in *Graham's Magazine*, April 1846. Three years later, when Dickinson was nineteen, Poe was dead, his contentious presence no longer to be found in the magazines. What seems likelier is that Dickinson writes of death in her own sublime mode against the widespread fashion of consolatory funereal versing. As J. Gerald Kennedy remarks in *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing*, "From the 1820s until well after the Civil War, the ladies' magazines and gift books promulgated an unending stream of lachrymose lyrics." It is the poetry of Lydia Huntley Sigourney that "best exemplifies the treacly treatment of mortality in all its forms," with such titles as "The Dying Mother's Prayer," "Death of a Clergyman," "Death of a Young Lady at a Retreat for the Insane," et al.

It is in contrast to the sentimentality and conventional piety of such a "flood of unbelievably bad writing" that Dickinson envis-

ages the speaker of her own poems as dying, or as dead. In “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –” (465), she writes,

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

It is the eyes of those gathered at the deathbed, not the dying speaker, that await the appearance of a Divine presence; as for the dying woman,

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

What an ironic reversal of the pious anticipations of those not themselves dying: “There interposed a Fly . . . And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see –.”

Dickinson’s dying speaker is indeed the heroine of her poem, heroic in honestly transcribing what the poet imagines as actuality rather than the clichés of a conventional piety in which she cannot believe. In her famous later poem, “Because I could not stop for Death,” she *could* “see to see –” after the finale of this life; in this great poem Dickinson again turns away from the consolatory gestures of conventional Christian piety; instead she finds herself embarked on an unexampled voyage of continual discovery which, by the end of the poem, offers an opening of mythic yet indeterminate emotion:

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

Here Death has been domesticated as a gentleman caller who stops for her—“The Carriage held but just Ourselves – / And Immortality”—the personification an astonishing metaphor, separating immortality from the soul on which it may be conferred.

Death is not a feared presence; on the contrary, with him, as she “slowly drove,” “I had put away / My labor and my leisure too, / For His Civility –.” And next, in a stunning trio of synecdoches, Dickinson encapsulates her labor and her leisure too—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

the anaphoric sequence embodying childish play (yet constrained by striving), the fruits of mature labor, and the decline or end of life (“Or rather – He passed Us –”); the round of Nature is perpetual, in the realm of time, while the riders in this carriage “paused before a House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground”—the grave from which the journey began.

Nothing in the poem suggests Heaven, the Last Judgement, the union of the soul with God; we began with Immortality and ended with Eternity. These are the companions of, or the gifts from, that courtly gentleman, Death. In such poems as these Emily Dickinson does indeed empower her female protagonist; this is done in the double context of deconstructing the cult of funerary sentimentality and asserting her intellectual and spiritual independence from the other convention surrounding death in her culture, as much conviction as remained of Calvinist predestination.

If Emily Dickinson had actually read Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition,” however, there are other dicta than his obligatory subject with which she would doubtless have agreed. Poe maintains that every aspect of the poem—its tone, its pattern of sounds, its rhythm—must all contribute to the production of an effect (which he alleges to be predetermined, although this is not necessarily the case). The way that Dickinson’s best poems are made substantiates the care that went into their making. Commenting on the peculiarities of her grammar, James Reeves remarks,

... we must take her poems for what they are: if any are good, they are technically good. There is no such thing as a good poem which is technically bad. We have to do with a poet of almost total originality,

and it is very rarely that originality and perfection go together. There is about all original poets—Skelton, Donne, Blake, Hopkins, Hardy—a curious homemade roughness of form. [*Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, xlviii–xlix.]

—a statement I would amend only by proposing that original poets such as Dickinson (and those others Reeves lists) achieve formal perfections of their own, necessitating critical redefinition of what constitutes perfection of form. A rule of thumb perhaps useful to apply to this question is, Can the poem be improved by any conceivable substitutions in the text the poet has given? If not, then the proffered form is as perfect as it can be made. Many of Dickinson's poems assuredly pass this test.

Although eroticism is rarely a Dickinson theme, when she does express it she gives us some of the boldest, most memorable poems of the century. Three, using as governing images the masculine sea and snake, are especially powerful. In "I started Early – Took my Dog –" (520), she gives a feminine counterpart to Whitman's otherwise incomparable eleventh section of *Song of Myself* ("Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore"). And her "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (986) can be matched only by her poem 160, "In Winter in my Room." In this, linked to her by a string is "a Worm – / Pink, lank and warm –" which becomes "A snake . . . / ringed with power," with the string still in her hand. The oneiric image ripples with beauty as well in this poem, which may be compared, not to its discredit, to D. H. Lawrence's magnificent "Snake." Dickinson concludes by fleeing her visionary snake (in "I started Early –" the voluptuous sea pursued her), and avowing "This was a dream." Even though writing for her own eyes only, she may have felt a need to distance her speaker from an apparition that could make her actual self feel uncomfortable or threatened.

In 143 of her poems the opening word is the pronoun *I*—it recurs elsewhere in many more, in fact *I* is the most frequent term in this poet's lexicon. Yet we must recall, and heed, her comment to Higginson, "When I state myself as the Representative of the Verse, it does not mean – me – but a *supposed* person." Ms. Wolff cogently relates her use of "Representative" to Emerson's heroizing *Representative Men*, and to his masculine delineation

tion of the ideal bard in his essay "The Poet," e.g., to choose a different passage from that cited by Wolff,

He is isolated among his contemporaries by truth and by his art, but with this consolation, that they will draw all men sooner or later. For all men live by truth and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.

It may well have been in response to this passage, or to another of the many of like import in Emerson's essay, that Dickinson wrote,

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles us – by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty –

Of Portion – so unconscious
The Robbing – could not harm –
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
Exterior to Time –

(448)

Although feminist critics have made much of Dickinson's embattled position as a woman poet contending against a solid phalanx of men, in this poem from her most productive year, 1862, she does not hesitate to identify the Poet as masculine. This seems not unreasonable, for Hawthorne's complaint about his fiction-writing contemporaries—"a horde of scribbling women"—

could be matched by the plethora of egregious poetesses whose rhymed effusions poured from the press. When Emily Dickinson began to write it is likely there was not a single living woman poet in America, and in England only Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Brontë, whose writings she could take seriously or with whom she could identify her own vocation.

Dickinson wrote very few poems dealing directly with poetry—not for her the equivalents of Emerson’s “Merlin,” Longfellow’s “Keramos,” or Poe’s “Al Aaraaf,” those explorations of art. The words *bard*, *bards*, *poet*, *poetry*, *poet’s* and *poets* occur (according to the concordance to her work) in only fifteen poems (whereas *death* appears in ninety-seven). In almost all of these, *poet* or *bard* is given neither gender. One, poem 321, “Her – ‘last Poems’ –” is an elegy for Elizabeth Barrett Browning; another, “Besides the Autumn poets sing” (131) is the only poem to name other poets, both men (“Mr. Bryant’s ‘golden Rod’ – / And Mr. Thomson’s ‘sheaves’ ”). Of the remaining poems about poetry, several are slight; but poem 569 gives the poet’s vocation the grandeur enjoined by Emerson and expressed in Dickinson’s sublime mode:

I reckon – when I count at all –
First – Poets – Then the Sun –
Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
And then – the List is done –

But looking back – the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole –
The Others look a needless Show –
So I write – Poets – All –

As for her gendering the “*supposed* person” who speaks in her verse, through her metaphoric descriptions of woman’s household chores and common experiences she exemplifies Emerson’s demand that poetry be discovered in the commonplace. Why should not the actualities of woman’s life, equally with man’s, fulfill, in the mind and hands of a true poet, such injunctions of his as “We are symbols and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems. . . . The

poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object."

So the feminizing of the protagonist of her poems is implicit in the imagery and metaphors drawn from such womanly spheres as have been remarked in several of the poems quoted above. But the conferring upon the engendered persona of the heroic stature Emerson attributed to the poet does not come merely from allusions to kitchen, loom, and garden. The poet's heroism results from her role in the great drama, searching and finding the ultimate truths of life and of death. Emerson also wrote, in "Nature,"

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

For Emerson, everything was spiritualized—language a symbol of natural facts, nature a symbol of spirit, and evil merely the absence of good. Dickinson courageously accepted Emerson's heady challenge, though not his facile solutions. Rejecting the received pieties of her family's and community's religious observances, she sought revelation, insight, an original relation to her universe. The consequences of this independence of mind and spirit required her rejection also of the conventionalities of poetizing acceptable to her contemporaries. Thus what seem eccentricities prove necessary elements for the expression of her spiritual, intellectual, and poetic independence.

Some of the more shallow attempts to explain her career are based on what is known of her life: the village recluse, self-isolated because of—what? bad eyesight? agoraphobia? a nervous breakdown? a blighted love affair?—all these theories despite the fact that every New England village had its share of spinsters, some as odd as those in stories by Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. But Emily Dickinson most likely kept much of the time to her home and her room because she was aware of how differently from everyone else she viewed the essentials of life, death, and belief. Reading her letters, it is surprising that one who

knew her inmost self so against the grain could also be a loving sister, aunt, neighbor, friend, and address her correspondents with such humor and tenderness. Her letters connected her to others—the record is incomplete, for many were destroyed or have been lost. Those that survive, while striated with arresting phrases, do not express the religious doubts, the explorations of eternity, the rich interior life with anything like the intensity that bursts from her poems.

In some letters, she seems not as sure of her own disbelief as readers of the poems might assume. When her friend Samuel Wadsworth had died and Judge Oliver Lord, to whom she wrote with great tenderness, was seriously ill, she appealed to an influential clergyman, the Reverend Washington Gladden, to answer her query, “Is immortality true?”, in the hope that he could console her, and she, Judge Lord. “God forbid that I should flatter one who is dying with any illusive hope,” Rev. Gladden replied, “but this hope is not illusive”—hardly the assurance for which she had hoped. The religion of tradition could give neither guarantees nor absolutes; she must explore the experience of the senses and the spirit herself, arriving at whatever mysterious, harsh, or consoling truths to which her mind led her. Her best poems are the condensations of analytical processes in which the concrete particulars of her images and metaphors are invested with significant meanings.

We may imagine her walking across a frozen field beneath an iron-grim clouded sky when a sudden sunburst spears a distant hill. No doubt to every other person in Amherst this would have suggested the coming of Spring, or an easing of melancholy, if not the hope or proof of resurrection. Emily Dickinson discovers in this shaft of sun what no one else perceives, making the natural event a providence, in the Puritan sense, a personal revelation:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,

But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

How Emily Dickinson transformed herself from the girl who penned a poetical valentine in doggerel couplets (poem 1, dated 1850) into, only a few years later, the rhapsodist of rococo and the diviner of the deepest American sublime, is as mysterious and miraculous as the metamorphosis of the writer of banal newspaper verses into the bard who confidently proclaimed “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul.” How fortunate the nation that has two poets of such original genius who could find their selves in the same century.

GEORGE WATSON

The Messiah of Modernism: F.R. Leavis (1895–1978)

Even in old age he looked agile and burnished, as one who loved the sun. By his fifties, when I first knew him, his bald brown head was ringed by a natural tonsurè, conferring an undeniable air of dedication, even a touch of the monkish, and his face was always marked by a severe reserve. In fact I could not confidently say that I ever saw Leavis smile, and his narrow features looked ill-constructed for the purpose. As for the voice, it was tense and obsessive, with some striking mannerisms like repeating a final phrase on a rising intonation: "... in any intelligible way, in any intelligible *way*," the last syllable being uttered with an intensity that was almost intimidating. His personality appeared to be elaborately constructed in order to impress, with words like "central" and "necessary" being used with a cold finality that settled all debate. Proud of his French accent, he always pronounced names like Proust in the French way—usually to disparage, however, since his loyalties from first to last were insular.

It would be misleading to say that his manner was bullying. But you often sensed a bottled anger ready to explode, which explains why his arguments were so seldom answered in committee—a fact that may have encouraged him to think them unanswerable. In private conversation he could be aggressively forgiving, as if only an abject apology for past wrongs could be expected from you, and a crucified sweetness of manner, almost unctuous at times, made an implicit claim to have suffered for his beliefs. He demanded submission, nothing less. By his middle years he had shed all the friends who were of an age near his own, since they had found the price of his friendship too high to pay, and knew only disciples of a younger generation, who seldom interrupted and never contradicted. He was the messiah, by then, of literary Modernism, a leader and a prophet.

When it comes to messiahs there is no middle way, and you can only believe in them or not. As an unbeliever I felt a natural embarrassment in the company of F.R. Leavis. It is never comfortable to be forgiven, especially for a fault one has not yet committed. This is a report, then, composed outside the charmed circle, as from a bystander. But for that very reason I may have missed a good deal. To be inside it, beyond doubt, could be an exciting experience. Leavis did not seem a dry, self-important little man to everyone. There were those who openly avowed he was their only reason for being in literary studies at all, and when that enthusiasm faded or collapsed, as it inevitably did, they were left with little but the sad realization that they had been interested in Leavis rather than in literature. "When Leavis read poetry during a lecture," one disciple has written, "it could seem as if for the moment the world stopped." That, in the glory days, was how it had felt to be a Leavisite. L.C. Knights, who in 1932 was to become the first editor of *Scrutiny*, has told how discipleship began at their very first meeting, when Leavis read to him a passage from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. No one can explain such moments; there is no arguing with the mystery of charisma. All of which leaves the historian at a loss. Like an historian of National Socialism, he is left now with the impossible task of conjuring an image out of a shade.

The charisma, it seems clear, began only in his middle years, and those who knew Leavis before the 1930s knew another being: diffident, conformist to the views of his late father, who had been a prosperous and eminent citizen of Cambridge, and modest about his own personal attainments. His most admired mentor in youth seems to have been the Reverend G.G. Coulton, an elderly historian of the English Middle Ages and hardly a disturbingly radical figure, with whom the young Leavis took bicycle-rides after lunch, following Coulton (so an eyewitness once told me) day by day out of town at a respectful distance of several yards. In an early letter, written soon after graduating in 1921, he once confessed to "a singularly unprepossessing gaucherie," which is disarming; and his doctoral thesis, which lies unpublished in Cambridge, is entitled *The Relationship of Journalism to Literature* (1924). A wholly conventional piece, it traces the early evolution of English periodicals from their seventeenth-century origins

down to Addison and Steele, and it is plainly the work of a card-indexing young historian. His early life continued to move forward on conventional lines. In the late 1920s he taught in Cambridge, mainly for women's colleges, and in 1929 he married one of his pupils, Queenie Roth.

He was not precocious. His first book, and perhaps his best, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), appeared when he was nearing forty, and it is a becomingly modest work. Its preface is a declaration of loyalty to T.S. Eliot, who by then was so celebrated that he did not need to be named. "How little I suppose these considerations to be original, the book will make plain: it is largely an acknowledgement, vicarious as well as personal, of indebtedness to a certain critic and poet," adding that the arguments had been "commonplaces for some years." Which they had. By 1932 I.A. Richards had long been lecturing on Eliot in Cambridge, which perhaps explains the odd word "vicarious"; so the avowal, though modest, is also just. Ending as a master of disciples, he began, almost deferentially, as a disciple to a master.

There is a darker side, to be sure, to Leavis' early life. A pacifist, like his father, he had served as a Red Cross orderly on the Western Front in 1916–18, where death and mutilation were ordinary sights; and three years later his father, a well-to-do tradesman in musical instruments, died in hospital of head injuries nearly two weeks after a motorcycling accident, in May 1921, and by a tragic coincidence Leavis began his final examinations on the very day of his death, achieving his degree, in the first class, a few weeks short of the mature age of twenty-six.

Such private griefs are only with difficulty to be balanced against the imaginary ones that accumulated over a long life. By the time he died, in 1978, in his eighties, so much of his own life had been reimagined that it is by now a laborious task to unpick the real from the fictitious. He came to think of himself as poor, though in 1921 he had inherited a modest competence from a successful father, and during the depressed thirties often seemed more affluent than his colleagues. He convinced himself that his digestion had failed, and would sit like a death's head at college dinners, eating nothing, though his old friend Denys Thompson would tell how, out of Cambridge, he could eat as hearty a dinner as anyone. He came to think of himself as an outsider to Cambridge English, though in his youth he had been encouraged

by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, then the only professor of English there. He came to believe, too, that the Faculty had failed to appoint him, or had appointed him only belatedly, though he must have known that faculties in Cambridge do not appoint. He came to believe that his friends and even members of his own family were enemies, probably because he sometimes confided to them out of hearing of his wife, who then anathematized them and forbade them the house. The several biographies of Leavis that have recently appeared—there were two in 1995—all more or less hagiographical, largely fail to understand how much of his sorrow was self-induced. There was no need for him to be so resolutely unhappy. He lived a prosperous life in the university town where he was born, was hearkened unto and even, by some, revered. No doubt his griefs were sincere and keenly felt. Whether they had much substance is another matter.

His resentments were at once petty and heroic. Petty, because it matters rather little, many would say, in a tragic century marked by starvation and genocide, whether or not academic tenure was granted a year or two late; heroic, in that he persuaded so many around him that he had narrowly survived an enormous and concerted persecution by an academic and literary establishment fearful of a truth that only he would tell. That myth of persecution lay at the heart of his charisma. No other literary critic, and perhaps no other academic, has ever persuaded a large part of advanced opinion in his time and against the evidence that he had been systematically wronged; no other ever built a myth of persecution so successfully into what he uttered and wrote. To be a Leavisite was to believe unquestioningly in the myth of Leavis' life. Other thinkers of the age excited interest by what they said. Leavis, in his day, excited it by what he was, or rather by what he claimed to be. He was the crucified hero of Modernism, and those who denied him, in that mythology, were worse than opponents. They were the enemies of civilization itself.

This was the magic circle one might choose to enter or obstinately remain outside. It has left many accounts. In *All Men Are Islands* (1964), Ronald Duncan, poet and playwright, has told how, when you were taught by Leavis, you became "conspirators whose aim was to blow up the English Faculty"; and, even better, you learned that you did not have to read much to think you knew it all, since in the whole of English literature "there are not more

than a hundred pages of the first quality.” Of course freshmen like to be told that: discipleship relieved you of the burdens of curiosity. If you were a Leavisite, there was no need to wear your eyes out. Another pupil, Donald Davie, once shrewdly remarked, in Ronald Hayman’s *My Cambridge* (1977), that Leavis’ minority culture was modelled on the English dissenting tradition of a gathered church—a communion of saints, no less—and that the irreplaceable charm of his quarterly journal *Scrutiny* (1932–53) lay ultimately in the simple fact that every issue made you a present of “perhaps a dozen authors or books or whole periods and genres of literature which I not only need not, but *should not* read.”

Leavis, in fact, made life look excitingly simple; he created a world of easy dismissal. Peter Hall, first director of the National Theatre in London, once mused in his *Diaries* (1983), on hearing of his death in April 1978, that as a student you only pretended to imbibe humanism in his lectures. “In fact we were enjoying his character assassinations,” adding, a touch naively: “Strange that a great moralist could be so destructive about creative artists.” Certainly not unparalleled, however, when you think of Plato and Savonarola. At all events Leavis had achieved a Siberia-style reputation by his middle years; and in literary London, by the 1940s, Cambridge had come to sound like a distant tundra of lost souls. In his verse autobiography *Summoned by Bells* (1960), John Betjeman, who seldom went there, made it sound subarctic:

When all the way from Cambridge comes a wind
To blow the lamps out every time they’re lit,
I know that I must light mine up again.

It was always difficult, in those years, to convince an outsider how modest a place Leavis played in the life of literary Cambridge. His disciples within Cambridge, by contrast, never doubted it, and they were right. His reputation was not local but worldwide.

That, in part, was because he was a master of publicity, and skillfully kept his name before the world, notably in polemical letters to editors, long after his capacity to lecture or write books had waned. Perhaps *Letters in Criticism* (1974), which usefully

collects them, will stand to future ages as his most characteristic work. In February 1962 his vituperative attack on C.P. Snow's *Two Cultures* (1959) was a well-calculated thunderbolt from a Jove whose arsenal was plainly running low. It embarrassed its student audience in Cambridge but sent shock waves through the media, even the tabloid press. When he reached retirement age, a few months later, he was appointed to teach at the new university of York, and there followed his only lecture-tour of the United States. But by then the shades were lengthening. In 1965, when a periodical called *The Cambridge Quarterly* was founded in his honor,¹ recriminations with his disciples followed, and his last dozen years were passed in a flurry of personal accusations of bad faith. One of his disciples barely restrained himself from shouting "Liar, liar," it is said, as he left the room, fresh in the discovery of what many had known for years: that Leavis was blessed, or cursed, with a creative memory.

So he was. But there are, after all, lies and lies. What are we to call those where the offender begins by convincing himself? Fantasy is not lying, in any simple sense, and by the time Leavis uttered he had long since convinced himself that what he said was true. His mind was endlessly fertile in self-deception. He had never cared for scholarly accuracy, in any case. It was foreign to the whole school of I.A. Richards he had been reared in, since it smacked (it was believed) of spiritual poverty. "I am a partisan of literature," I once heard Richards say in a public lecture. "I have never professed scholarship, and if I were offered scholarship I would not accept it." I never heard Leavis say anything like that, but his whole manner and conduct proclaimed it, and it is the sort of remark, alas, all too likely to endear itself to a student audience. It makes life look simple and easy.

It was only after his Cambridge retirement in 1962, however, that the larger instances of fantasizing became public. A committee set up by Downing College to recommend a successor disbanded at once when he told them, unprompted, that the college had assured him he could choose one for himself. In July 1973 his old collaborator Denys Thompson revealed in a letter to

¹ In 1996, *The Cambridge Quarterly* published an F.R. Leavis Special Issue called "Reminiscences and Revaluations" as Vol. XXV, No. 4, on the occasion of the publication of *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* by Ian MacKillop.

the *Guardian* that “we compiled our own advertisements for dissection” in composing *Culture and Environment* (1933), laughing together in Leavis’ garden, as he later told me, as they did so. In other words, the evidences solemnly offered there of the decay of literary culture were an invention—though, as Thompson cheerfully remarked in his published letter, “some of them have since been quoted as genuine period pieces.” That goes a great deal further than careless howlers like using a late, revised text of Henry James to illustrate the excellence of James’s early style. Leavis was as likely to compare a text or to verify a reference as he was to think favorably of a colleague. But it was only in his last years that he was exposed as a fabricator.

In all this he was, in his own view, a justified sinner. The hero-villain of James Hogg’s novel *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) believed he has been justified by divine election to commit murder. The Scottish novel was of course a critique of Calvinism. Leavis, who murdered reputations rather than people, had no religion. Like his father before him, he was a high-minded agnostic in the late Victorian style, though he once remarked to his college chaplain, and with great emphasis, “I *like* religion,” meaning (no doubt) that he admired moral seriousness. His view of the arts was wholly Victorian, too, a survival of the age of George Eliot and Matthew Arnold, above all in its claim to the moral authority of great literature. As Henry James once said of Ruskin’s view of art, in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1878): “Instead of a garden of delight, he finds a sort of assize-court in permanent session.” That sums up Leavis’ view to a nicety. He was the last Victorian, and his self-appointed task as a critic was to keep that view alive. Literature was to be the religion of a religionless age. As he would say, it was central.

So urgent a cause justified, one might easily come to think, a fib or two. There was a whole world to be saved, after all, and the minority culture of which he held himself to be the commanding spirit fully justified him, in his own mind, in anything he did. If the disciple had in fact shouted “Liar, liar” after him as he left the room, he would have found his hide as impermeable as a Sherman tank. He was the bearer of a great truth, and if for an instant he forgot it there were always those about, notably his wife, to remind him of the fact. “India was going communist,” he remarked once to a group of admirers, “and I sent some of my

pupils out and they stopped it.” He was never wrong, never at a loss. When an American Dickensian justly pointed out that the Leavises had falsely claimed, in *Dickens the Novelist* (1970), and in defiance of the published record, that they had always admired Dickens, a disciple was ready with an answer and a justification. Criticism to Leavis, he explained, like novel-writing to his idol D.H. Lawrence, was “the product of a savage pilgrimage” by which ever deeper truths about mankind are explored. If Dickens meant little to Leavis in the 1930s, then, that is simply because “his preoccupations were elsewhere.” But in the 1940s “Dickens became an increasingly powerful focus.” That amazing apologia appeared some years after Leavis’ death, in *The Sewanee Review* in the summer of 1985, and it is characteristically barefaced. Perhaps paranoia is the one form of mental illness to be infectious. Dickens did not matter in the 1930s to Leavis because he did not matter—never mind why. Some years later Dickens mattered because—well, because he did. A savage pilgrimage is no place, evidently, to admit that you were once mistaken. So of course Leavis was entitled to say he had always admired Dickens when, belatedly and with his wife’s help, he came to write a whole book about him, even though it was not true and even though he and others knew it was not true. Such are the ways of the savage pilgrim. One of Trollope’s heroes, according to the title of the book, knew he was right. Leavis, in spite of his many changes of view, had an even more enviable gift. He knew he had never been wrong.

His political views, in the sense of party affiliations, were never prominent in his writings, and perhaps for that very reason have sometimes been misunderstood. He has been called a liberal critic, though none of his more important writings date from that short period in the 1960s when, as an ex-socialist, he tentatively supported the Liberal Party. Much of *New Bearings* was probably written before he was a socialist, but on present evidence that cannot be established. In the 1930s he sat on a Cambridge committee representing various shades of left-wing opinion, including members of the Communist Party, and dedicated in the days of university seats to electing a socialist to represent the university in the House of Commons; but he never seems to have been a Marxist—rather a socialist in the English tradition of John

Ruskin and William Morris. By his last years he was some sort of conservative, but no friend of the Conservative Party, if only because he hated economic growth, motorways and British membership of the European common market; and he ended a long life in bitter isolation, hating the modern world and all its works, a sort of Tory Green. His disciples might hold any view of public affairs or none, any religious view or none. So though he earned for himself the title of a social critic, he did so independently of any lasting commitment, of a dedicated kind, to a party or church.

The radicalism of his personality has perhaps been exaggerated. An open shirt, tieless, is no more the mark of an iconoclast or of inferior social origin than of a gentleman taking his ease, and Lord David Cecil, an Oxford professor whose father was a marquess and grandfather a Tory prime minister, never seemed to me to dress any better. Leavis is reported, in a bitter exchange at a faculty committee, to have demanded of a colleague who had disagreed with him "the satisfaction of a gentleman," which sounds terribly grand, especially since duelling has been illegal for hundreds of years. Not that he was grand, though he took pride in the belief that an ancestor was a seventeenth-century Huguenot duke. He was a man of the middle classes, rather richer than most of his colleagues because of a commercially successful father; and though he derided the garden-suburb ethos, he lived all his life in just such a suburb, by choice, and in a series of villas suggestive of mounting affluence. His poverty, of which he often spoke, seems to have been a self-induced illusion.

One could not be entirely certain how to place him. An early critic, one John L. Beevers, writing in the *New English Weekly* in April 1934, when *Scrutiny* was only two years old, oddly thought him a fascist, or rather one who unwittingly aided Fascism: not "the shirted, full-blooded kind, with its programme of preliminary violence, its exaltation of the State and its progressive militarism," but something altogether more dilute: "thin and watery and, although every bit as sentimental as the worst type of Fascism, . . . non-creative"—looking back to a rural England, but without "the vigor to create a programme or to evolve a creed," a passive reaction that never translated itself into action. That is thought-provoking, if not convincing. Perhaps there are some shared sources here, along with Allen Tate and the Southern Agrarians

of the 1930s in the American critical tradition. But Leavis would never have marched to any drum. He was nostalgic for a pre-industrial England before it had been ruined by what he bitterly called technicologico-Benthamism: in short, he hated the Industrial Revolution and its alleged cultural effects. Perhaps he was a Green before the Greens ever thought of having a party. But if they had he would probably have found a reason for not joining it.

His style, which has often been denigrated, was an almost unique blend of the assertive and the evasive. The claims look bold and large, but they often dwindle into the nebulous if you examine them. A single instance will serve, and it is classic. One of his last books, *D.H. Lawrence, Novelist* (1955), a passionate eulogy, ends with a bitter attack on T.S. Eliot for having thought too little of Lawrence, whose genius, Leavis concludes, “manifests itself in an infallible centrality of judgement” with “an unfailingly sure sense of the difference between that which makes for life and that which makes against it . . .” That is impressively devious, when you think about it. Infallible, at first glance, might mean that Lawrence was always right: an implausible claim, evidently, and one open to easy derision. But look again, and you will see that it was not Lawrence’s judgements that were infallible but their centrality. So what does central mean? The school of *Scrutiny* prided itself on its close reading of texts, or rather of all texts except the master’s. You were banished if you asked such a question; and as for “that which makes for life,” it would be seen as an open confession of insensitivity to question the phrase at all.

The last words of the book are darkly and richly gnomic:

I speak as one who, when years ago Mr Eliot wrote in *The Criterion* of the frightful consequences that might have ensued if Lawrence ‘had been a don at Cambridge, “rotten and rotting others”’, was widely supposed—at Cambridge, anyway, where it mattered—to share the honor of the intention with Lawrence.

That is the sort of sentence that gave Leavis the reputation of writing badly. In fact it is a cleverly disguised boast of some importance. At first reading it looks as if Eliot had attacked the young Leavis, all those years ago in the 1930s. Impressive, if so. In fact it merely claims that Eliot was “widely supposed” to have done so, and it is not revealed whether the supposition was true or false. Cambridge mattered, no doubt, because Leavis lived and worked

there. So though Eliot may not have done Leavis the signal honor of having thought him important enough to be attacked, the outcome was much as if he had.

Such self-aggrandizing claims stand far beyond the reach of evidence, which makes them look all the more adroit. How could one disprove that people had thought Leavis the target of Eliot's attack when they read *The Criterion*? By a subtle trick of suggestion, like an expert attorney, Leavis places himself in the line of victims beside his hero Lawrence and in the path of fire of the most celebrated critic of the age. It is not just the enormous presumption of the passage that leaves one gasping, but the skill by which that presumption is veiled. This was the one aspect of Leavis which in his lifetime was consistently underrated. He was a great stylist. Those who thought him a potent thinker cursed by crabbed diction missed the point altogether. It is doubtful if he ever had much to say that was genuinely his own, and it is doubtful whether, in a lifetime of writing, he ever added a particle to human knowledge. But he was artist enough with words to convince thousands, for years and for decades, that he was a fountain of irreplaceable truth.

By the last years the illusions had grown thick and menacing. A few months before his death, in January 1978, when he became a Companion of Honour, I.A. Richards wrote to him, as I did, in congratulation. I had no reply, and expected none; Richards had an unsigned one-sentence letter that read simply "We repudiate with contempt any approach from you." In Mrs. Leavis' hand, it was addressed by Leavis himself and delivered by hand, and Richards, on receiving it, was merely amused, but it leaves one now with a blank sense of waste. A few months later Leavis was dead, and his widow survived him by only three years. Contemplating that unsigned letter which, like many of their writings, they must have composed together, one is left with the undying image of a self-tortured being, of an extravagant will reduced to mere tetchiness. It is hard to conceive of the mind that could take satisfaction from such an act, and though it defies any attempt at justification, some explanation must be attempted.

There are two aspects of Leavis' life which, being unpalatable, are seldom mentioned, and at the risk of seeming callous I shall outline them briskly and in brief.

One is that, from his middle years, he was afraid of his wife. A good many people found her alarming, including myself, so this is not a matter for conventional mockery. Leavis is reported to have called her the embodiment of passionate will, which sounds right. A bitter woman, she had been profoundly disappointed by a lack of academic promotion and became increasingly jealous of her husband's fame, and by her last years she appeared to take no pleasure in life except in the mortification of others. Of eminently Orthodox Jewish family in London, she had been expelled on marrying out and formally declared dead, and though the marriage was close and lifelong, its atmosphere was acrid. In his last years Denys Thompson used to say it was rather like having a circular saw in the house. She did not nag him or have cause to do so, since his obedience was instant and unflinching. But she nagged at the world for what it had allegedly done (or failed to do) to him and to her—"And the editor didn't publish your reply," she would say, and he would repeat obediently "And the editor didn't publish my reply"—she forbade him his friends and even his children, and she held open court to her unending literary and personal opinions. One simply had to listen or to leave. All that helps to explain something the world had no way of understanding at the time, when Leavis in public sounded like a fearless prophet. He was more like the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. If you never win an argument at home, after all, you are bound to want to win one when you are out of the house. A female colleague who had brought up children once told me he reminded her of a small boy coming home from school with blood on his face, shouting, "You should see the other guys."

The other truth, no less saddening, is that by his middle years Leavis was bored with literature.

Again, this is not a matter for mockery. In academic life it is common enough to lose interest by middle age, and perhaps one should be less surprised when it happens than when it does not. What presumption is there, after all, that an active and intelligent being should continue with the same interest for half a century? The dilemma can be painful and even insoluble. It is not usually easy, or even possible, to change profession in one's forties, and yet the situation cries out for a displacement activity of some kind. Some academics go into administration, in which Leavis never showed the faintest ability or interest: in fact he was inclined, on

a committee, to turn it into a literary seminar and, when that failed, to resign. Some try to make money, a life for which Leavis had neither aptitude nor inclination; some turn to pleasure. Leavis, who had no such options, turned to himself in the sense of cultivating his reputation and guarding it against rival critics by destructive comment. He became the keeper of the Leavis cult: a curious and perhaps unique religion in that its god was its prophet and its prophet its priest. There could be no other gods but he. Lionel Trilling could not be mentioned in his presence: he was a dangerous rival; Cambridge colleagues, if they were not evil, were buffoons; so was everybody else. "We doubt Edmund Wilson's qualifications to talk about Dickens," he once told a lecture-audience. "We doubt Edmund Wilson's qualifications to talk about any literature." The pontifical We suggests how far he had left reality behind; the absence of argument how little, by then, he cared for it. He was judge, jury and executioner.

But then he did not, by then, like books. If you spoke admiringly of an author he would look contemptuous or, if the speaker was his wife, fall into an embattled silence. His lectures were about himself—imaginative recreations of a past life: how he had been the first to notice that Henry James was a great novelist or T.S. Eliot a great poet, how lamentably the world had failed in the due veneration of D.H. Lawrence, how a friend had betrayed him or an editor traduced him and then allowed him no right of reply. One early admirer, W.W. Robson of Oxford, once emerged from a meeting remarking scornfully: "He should have called it *Why I Am a Great Critic*." Meanwhile the world had begun to blow the whistle on some of his claims. In *The Buried Day* (1960), C. Day Lewis, soon to be Poet Laureate, told how when he was an Oxford freshman in the 1920s Maurice Bowra had "urged me to read *The Waste Land* at a time when, according to Dr Leavis, Dr Leavis was the only teacher in any English university to have acknowledged the genius of T.S. Eliot." It was difficult to avoid the voice of Leavis in those postwar years: but did you have to believe it?

He was still a famous man, however exploded in reputation, and even in retirement he had to teach. Often, in those sad last years, at a loss for something to say, he would fall silent during his own lectures. I once heard him read a short poem by William Blake and then remark to his audience: "There is nothing to be said about this, nothing." His classrooms were not empty only

because he was celebrated, but those who came looked bored and glum. By the 1950s a volcano had turned extinct, and his visit to Harvard in the mid-1960s was accounted a disappointment, since he uttered no more than dull diatribes punctuated by bitter reflections about former friends and colleagues. Of the first editor of *Scrutiny*, for example, he remarked merely: "We got more out of him than he had."

When he died he left a shrinking band of disciples whose lives had come to little, or little he would have sanctioned. The decline of his influence began long before it was noticed outside Cambridge. Oxford, for example, had some committed if slightly unorthodox admirers like F.W. Bateson and W.W. Robson as late as the 1970s, which was long after Cambridge had ceased to interest itself in the matter; and his reputation survived even longer in literary London and in some Commonwealth countries like India and Australia. I recall sitting in a Cambridge bar with Louis MacNeice in the early 1960s and failing to persuade him, fresh as he was from London and the BBC, that Cambridge English was no longer seized with the spirit of *Scrutiny*. London reviews continued for years to assume that all things literary in Cambridge revolved around him and his school, long after his claim that literature was the central discipline of academic life had come to look vainglorious and empty. In 1963 the Cambridge University Press, still impressed by his name, reprinted *Scrutiny* in twenty volumes for a world market, with an index and an embarrassingly self-congratulatory Retrospect by Leavis himself. Somewhere he was read.

Ironical, perhaps, that London reviews and academic publishers should have kept his reputation alive for so long, since he had always believed that a sinister establishment of reviewers and publishers had been the great adversary of his career. I never heard him comment on any of the praise heaped upon him, in those last years, by the journals, but then no praise was ever enough, and he could sense a hostile qualification in every phrase. He was in any case infatuated with an establishment of another kind. Readers of Evelyn Waugh will call it Brideshead, or the world of titled families. I do not know that the matter has been mentioned in print, but the sober truth is that Leavis, by the 1950s, was an ebullient name-dropper when it came to the rich, the famous and the aristocratic: "... invited to lunch by the

vice-chancellor after my lecture—met Lord and Lady X, who seemed very charming, very charming, then went to stay with my old pupil who is now director of . . . ” His voice would rise in animation as he relived his social triumphs: “All very delightful, very delightful, but rather tiring.” Though money did not interest him, the world of the monied did; the world of the titled still more.

The story ended before he did, but its epilogue was dramatic. In 1981 the pupil he had ardently wanted as a college successor, Morris Shapira, by then a lecturer in the University of Kent, was murdered at his home in Canterbury in a homosexual encounter. Like many disciples, he had written nothing. That is not surprising. While the spell of Leavis lasted there was nothing to say, since Leavis had said it; and when the spell broke, or faded, there was nothing to say for another reason, since it had been woven by Leavis and not by literature. Those who need exciting teaching in order to think literature exciting, it hardly needs to be said, are themselves unexcited by literature, so the outcome was bound to be bitter. Just before she died his widow angrily protested that she had written large chunks of his books herself, including the first chapter of *The Great Tradition* (1948), and insisted that for years she had been resenting her unacknowledged role. So there was no peace for Leavis in the grave, or beyond it.

The rise and fall of the *Scrutiny* movement had best be contemplated in restrained and measured terms. Some have wished to see its collapse as confirming the death of humanism, or the claim that literature teaches how to live. Literature plainly did not teach Leavis that, or his school, so the conclusion, rash as it is, was bound to be drawn. It would be more prudent, perhaps, though still not wholly reassuring, to draw a more limited conclusion: that literature may not make you better, but tells you what you are.

R. S. GWYNN

Black Helicopters

Gather your families. Lift your eyes.
They'll take your daughters and your sons.
Black helicopters rule the skies.
The New World Order wants your guns.

They'll take your daughters and your sons
For schooling that is "outcome based."
The New World Order wants your guns
And getting them is just a taste,

For schooling that is "outcome based"—
Condoms for kids instead of prayer—
And taking them is just a taste:
Look at the uniforms they wear!

Condoms for kids instead of prayer.
Soon there'll be nowhere left to go.
Look at the uniforms they wear!
What's further out than Idaho?

Soon there'll be nowhere left to go.
Dust clouds are rising on the road.
(What's further out than Idaho?)
Look to the heavens. Lock and load.

Dust clouds are rising on the road.
Gather your families, lift your eyes.
Look to the heavens. Lock and load.
Black helicopters rule the skies.

Coastal Freeze

It will come with warnings published on the air,
so beware
laying bets on gulf-born breezes harboring
hopes of spring.
Dwarf azaleas, playing suckers' odds with doom,
race to bloom,
and the front's relentless lashing drains each bud-
ful of blood,
laying low without distinction as it kills
daffodils,
bougainvillea, calla lilies, collard greens.
For it means
all beginner's luck runs sour, to be lost
to the frost
like a wealth of unconsidered good advice.
Glazed with ice,
greenness shatters, brittle as an ancient bone,
and our own
stunned camellia stands, white petals shed below—
snow on snow.

Bone Scan

Shadows surround me, building in the air
Like clouds, were I inclined here to compare
My kingly state to portents in the sky.
I could say the expected: I could lie,
Claiming our long-term forecast will be fair.

So, family and friends, do not despair.
 Shadows are nothing. There is nothing there.
 Knives will find nothing wrong. Still, I know why
 Shadows surround me.

The night my father died, I moved my chair
 Close to his bed to touch his meager hair.
 These shadows gathered in his room that I
 Might gather I was not too young to die.
 Machinery hums. A tunnel beckons where
 Shadows surround me.

Before Prostate Surgery

Farewell, thou joy of my right hand, my toy;
 My sin was too much use of thee, old boy—
 At least the old wives' tales would have it thus,
 And I am too downcast to raise a fuss
 Or much of anything, to put it simply.
 Now from the ashes of my hot and pimply
 Youth and each profligate misspent erection
 I bid thee rise to spiritual perfection.
 Say, "Here I lie, the truest poem of Sam,
 No epic but a passing epigram."
 And pray, that in the deft hand of a lover
 From death to life we might thee yet recover.

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

What to Do with Carlyle?

In one of his letters, Robert Frost defined “style” as “the way a man carries himself toward his ideas and deeds,” then gave some examples of how different writers such as Stevenson, Swinburne, and Emerson, carried themselves stylistically. The only example to receive a bad grade was Thomas Carlyle’s whose way of taking himself, Frost said, “simply infuriates me.” Surely Frost’s is a reasonable response to the most intractable and cantankerous of Victorian sages. I first encountered Carlyle through snippets from a large double-columned anthology of Victorian prose (Harrold and Templeman) that didn’t help to make him appealing. But since I was in search of facts I needed to master for a Ph.D. oral, I read Carlyle’s chapters on the Everlasting No and Everlasting Yea, from *Sartor Resartus*, and took careful notes on what he “meant” by those terms. Further pages followed, as I remember, from *The French Revolution, Past and Present*, and—as example of the later Carlyle—“Shooting Niagara.” All sputter and invective and self-righteousness, I decided: a most infuriating writer indeed.

In his readable new biography of the sage, Simon Heffer is convinced that Carlyle is a heroic and indispensable figure whose trajectory since his death in 1881 has been “a long and damaging fall from the pedestal he occupied.”¹ Carlyle cries out, as Mr. Heffer sees it, for “rediscovery and reappraisal,” especially with regard to his writings and their contribution to political thought. Heffer’s introduction stresses Carlyle’s humorousness and his kindness toward his family, and the biographer sums things up as follows:

If he is estranged from polite society today it is because his humour is

¹ MORAL DESPERADO: A Life of Thomas Carlyle, by *Simon Heffer*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Distributed by Trafalgar Square, North Pomfret, Vermont. \$29.95.

misunderstood and his candour undervalued in a world based on avoiding truths wherever those truths are uncomfortable.

This immediately struck me as unconvincing, since I know of no “polite society” from which Carlyle is estranged: surely academic society, where he is discussed at times, can’t be construed as “polite.” To blame “the world” for undervaluing Carlyle because that world seeks to avoid unpalatable truths, while not understanding the sage’s humor, seems an abstract and unuseful way of blaming anything but Carlyle himself.

Is it true that Carlyle’s fall from the pedestal is any more radical than those of his three great Victorian contemporaries—Ruskin, Newman, and Arnold? (Mill has continued to get a good press, especially for *The Subjection of Women*.) Carlyle was the subject, as the others were not, of a great biography by J.A. Froude to which Mr. Heffer pays generous tribute. Most recently Fred Kaplan has provided a fully scrupulous, though quite unhumorous, account of the life, which had been earlier told, most succinctly and entertainingly, by Julian Symons, a master of the biographer’s trade. Kaplan makes no mention of Symons’ book; Heffer mentions neither Kaplan nor Symons; one wonders whether these omissions are made in the fear that one’s own biography will seem less groundbreakingly unique. In fact, Heffer’s new one has nothing, that I can see, to add to the facts of Carlyle’s life; his commentary on the books is however—like Symons’—lively and pertinent (Kaplan does little with Carlyle’s writings). But perhaps it is enough justification for a new biography if it can bring us to fresh engagement with its subject, and that, *Moral Desperado* most surely succeeds in doing.

Of course any biographer of Carlyle must take his bearings in relation to Froude’s biography, and not only the biography but the books he brought out after Carlyle’s death in 1881: first the *Reminiscences*, containing Carlyle’s agonized reflections put down after his wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, had died and he had discovered, in looking over her letters, how much she suffered during the course of their marriage—how much, in his inattention and silent withdrawal, he was responsible for that suffering. The *Reminiscences* (1881) were quickly followed by the first two volumes of Froude’s biography (covering Carlyle’s years in Scotland); then, in 1883, *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, with notes by both Carlyle and Froude; finally, the second half of the

biography, detailing the London years and Jane's increasing unhappiness. As the well-known story has it, Carlyle's descendants were outraged by what they felt to be Froude's partiality toward Jane, his suggestion that Carlyle was impotent, and his willingness to write the sort of "warts-and-all" biography Carlyle himself desired. Froude defended himself ably enough, but the counter-attack continued.² Though Simon Heffer doesn't get caught up in the old quarrel, his sympathies clearly lie with Froude's portrait of the Carlyle marriage; and since Carlyle himself, after Jane's death, contributed so much to filling out the painful picture it's impossible not to feel strongly towards this forty-year marriage of two extraordinary gifted sufferers. Yet in some heartless way, for all our sympathetic vibrations to each of them, we wouldn't have had it otherwise.

A good place to begin reading Carlyle is a review of two books of philosophy he published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1831, not long after he came to live in London. Titled "Characteristics," it is less a review than a bold attempt at characterizing the spirit of the age, containing in embryo all Carlyle's later religious and political ideas. In fact, it is a mistake to speak as if "ideas" in Carlyle's writing were something that could be abstracted from the prose and studied at leisure. As John Holloway shrewdly observed, in his still useful book *The Victorian Sage*, rather than being presented with an argument to which one does or doesn't give assent, "the reader is hurried, as if by an all-pervading and irresistible violence, from one problem to another." It's the violence and the hurry that, one suspects, must have infuriated Frost, who was unlikely to have read "Characteristics," where Carlyle proceeds with relative calm and clarity:

The healthy know not of their health, but only the sick: this is the Physician's Aphorism; and applicable in a far wider sense than he gives it. We may say, it holds no less in moral, intellectual, political, poetical, than in merely corporeal therapeutics; that whatever, or in what shape soever, powers of the sort which can be named *vital* are at work, herein lies the test of their working right or working wrong.

² In *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London, 1992), Ian Hamilton has an entertaining chapter on the warfare between supporters and detractors of Froude's work on Carlyle. Christopher Ricks, in his essay "Froude's Carlyle," has provided a sensitive defense of Froude's biographical and critical procedures (*Essays in Appreciation*, London, 1996).

In the Body, for example, as all doctors are agreed, the first condition of complete health is, that each organ perform its function unconsciously, unheeded; let but any organ announce its separate existence, were it even beautifully, and for pleasure, not for pain, then already has one of those unfortunate "false centres of sensibility" established itself, already is derangement there. The perfection of bodily well-being is, that the collective bodily activities seem one, and be manifested, more-over, not in themselves but in the action they accomplish.

He goes on to treat England as a very unhealthy place indeed, cataloguing with some relish the various derangements under which it suffers. In "Characteristics," and in "Signs of the Times" (published a year or so earlier), Carlyle's first significant assault on "machinery," materialism, and the utilitarian calculus, we have as Heffer notes, "the foundations of his outlook and principles" set forth in an accessible, vigorously stated prose.

At a basic enough level, one could even say that these essays said what he had to say about modern civilization. But Carlyle was a *writer*, and writers once they get launched tend not to stop the flow: the early essays and reviews were succeeded by two unique examples of Genius Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus* (1834) and *The French Revolution* (1836). In these two immoderate books he exploited to the full the famous Style toward which readers would have such mixed feelings. In responding to critics of the way he used language in *Sartor*, Carlyle replied that "if one has thoughts not hitherto uttered in English Books, I see nothing for it but that you must use words not found there, must *make* words." From a more disinterested source, Julian Symons, comes the best description of this "making" I know of:

The style of Carlyle remains unique in English. It is at once breathlessly colloquial and full of elaborate metaphors; connectives are eliminated to gain force; words become displaced in the sentences, as it seems by accident, but always with the effect of increasing power and urgency of expression; the parts of speech abandon their usual functions, and move into new and fantastic patterns. . . . It brings together in a single paragraph, sometimes in a single sentence, neologisms and compound words, strange nicknames like Teufelsdröckh, and fantastic metaphors: the whole informed with a humour at once extravagant and clownish, obscure yet overflowing with vigour.

Carlyle extinguished, so Symons argues, classical diction in prose.

For at least this reader, an amateur at history, the genius of

Carlyle's achievement in *The French Revolution* comes through in memorable scenes where the historian's own excess and exhilaration "breathlessly" animate characters and settings. Not the least attractive of Carlyle's appeals is his occasional willingness to confess how much beyond even *his* mortal powers as a writer is the immense subject. Preparing to describe the siege of the Bastille, he pauses, asserting that it "perhaps transcends the talent of mortals. Could one but, after infinite reading, get to understand so much as the plan of the building!" But he plunges on undaunted, after winning us over by his confession of defeat. For all its huffings and puffings, and partly because of them, *The French Revolution* has an attractive, you-are-there feel to it that bears out Carlyle's claim to Mill, who had been critical of Carlyle's stylistic excesses, that "the great business for me, in which alone I feel any comfort, is recording the presence, bodily concrete coloured presence of things." But the other "genius" book of Carlyle's youth—*Sartor Resartus*—can't similarly be rationalized and justified, at least for one like myself who has butted his head unrewardingly against this monstrous work. In a recent introduction to *Sartor* in the World's Classics series, its editors offer it to us, with some seriousness, as "essentially a work of imaginative fiction that demands a more sensitive and complex response than that in which its formal and stylistic husks are stripped away to reveal the doctrinal kernels." They also recommend it by pointing to Emerson's sponsorship of it, as well as to its influence on Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Well and good, and surely the days have passed when "doctrinal kernels" like the Everlasting Yea (which Christopher Ricks suggests may have been succeeded in our own day by the Everlasting Yeah), the Centre of Indifference, or The Dandiacal Body, are to be lifted out of what the editor in *Sartor* calls "the enormous, amorphous Plumpudding, more like a Scottish Haggis, which Herr Teufelsdröckh had kneaded for his fellow mortals, to pick out the choicest Plums." There remains the question of just how satisfying, as imaginative fiction, *Sartor* turns out to be in the reading. In response to Mill's worry that its "mode of writing, between sarcasm or irony and earnest" might not have been too unrelievedly employed, Carlyle conceded Mill's point, and said the mode probably had something to do with not knowing "who my audience is, or whether I have any audience"—thus the "Devil-may-care principle" informing the book. And he added, saliently, "Besides I have under all

my gloom genuine feeling of the ludicrous; and could have been the merriest of men, *had I not been the sickest & saddest.*" Contemporary readers—assuming they pick up the book at all—must decide for themselves whether and how often Carlyle's "ludicrous" mode is all that funny, especially when compared with his acknowledged ancestors, Swift's *Tale of a Tub* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. To my eyes and ears, *Sartor* feels, by comparison with those satirical operations, heavy-footed and haranguing, even as it tries to be madcap and Devil-may-care. But then, John Stuart Mill, soberest of critics, eventually came round to reading it with keen delight.

These two works from the 1830s were—with the exception of the later *Reminiscences*—Carlyle's most "literary" performances. More than once—and increasingly—in later years he would contemptuously express his alienation from the world of literature: in a letter from the 1840s to James Spedding, he announces that "I begin very greatly to despise the thing they call 'Literature.'" And even when, in his early reviews, he took on literary figures, he had little to say about their expressive qualities. The essay on Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is very funny about Croker, very appreciative of Boswell's character, but tells us nothing about why Johnson is a great writer. The review of Lockhart's Scott gives us no insight into why Scott as a novelist should be read. And the pages on Shakespeare in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* ("The Poet as Hero") while full of adulation for the poet's strength, greatness, morality, intellect, what-you-will, have nothing to say about his achievement with words. In a moment like our present one, when the head of Dartmouth College's English department warns us, primly, that we must not "deify" Shakespeare, it is good to read out in response Carlyle's thunderous deification of him: "Such a calmness of depth; placid joyous strength; all things imaged in that great soul of his so true and clear, as in a tranquil unfathomable sea!" But beyond that, there's little to be got from the lecture. Where Carlyle is superb, though in very brief compass, is in his portrait of Coleridge on Highgate Hill (in *The Life of John Sterling*), or of Wordsworth (in *Reminiscences*); what's superb is the evocative portraiture rather than any literary-critical judgment delivered. You can *argue* with Samuel Johnson in his extended setting out of Shakespeare's virtues and defects in Johnson's preface to his edition of the poet; with Carlyle one beats the empty air, as one does if one looks to find out, in *Past and Present*, about what "Hero-worship" should

properly consist in, and is given the following: "it is the summary, ultimate essence, and supreme practical perfection of all manner of 'worship,' and true worships and noblenesses whatsoever." No doubt, but where do we go from there?

By the late 1840s Carlyle was turning out the rancorous essays that would be published as *Latter-Day Pamphlets*—to which "The Nigger Question" provided a fittingly unpleasant introduction. He had originally titled it, more politely, "The Negro Question," then when informed that people were outraged by it, proceeded to retitle to make it more offensive. Heffer remarks that Carlyle was "making a career out of being ill-natured in the most entertaining way, albeit often unintentionally." But "The Nigger Question" may not qualify as bona fide entertainment, and even "racism" is an inadequate word for Carlyle's attitude toward black people whom he tolerated as long as they remained slaves, docilely eating pumpkins and drinking rum: "A swift, supple fellow; a merry-hearted, grinning, dancing, singing, affectionate kind of creature, with a great deal of melody and amenability in his composition" (Carlyle may have figured this was a genially entertaining touch of style). It was about this time that Mill, appalled by some of the things Carlyle was saying, ended their relationship: Carlyle professed not to understand why Mill had so taken offense. The habit of fixing on a colorful phrase, then beating the reader to death with it, more and more substituted for analysis and argument. In "Shooting Niagara" (1867) for example—usually taken as the final exercise in Carlylean negation and despair—he coins the word "swarmeries" to indicate superstitions that hold man in delusive wastefulness. Such is, prominently, literature, "what they call Art, Poetry, and the like . . . that inane region, fallen so inane in our mad era." Art or Poetry is nothing but "a refined Swarmery; the most refined now going; and comes to us in venerable form, from a distance of above a thousand years." Convinced he is seeing through nothing less than everything, Carlyle abandons his mind and his prose to frenzied dithyramb. Here was the moral desperado Matthew Arnold disliked, even as—his biographer points out justly—the "authoritarian" tone in Arnold's own *Culture and Anarchy* owed much to Carlylean doctrines.

Around his house in Chelsea, the moral desperado was also in evidence. Here the witness is Jane Carlyle, who succinctly characterized Carlyle's physical and emotional state: "as usual, never

healthy, never absolutely ill—protesting against ‘things in general’ with the old emphasis—with an increased vehemence just at present.” This was in the 1840s, and things would only get worse when Carlyle embarked upon the deadening thirteen-year project of a life of Frederick the Great—Jane would die before he had completed it. “This man of mine will absolutely do nothing but write books and be sick,” she had written earlier to John Forster, Dickens’ biographer, but the chipper tone is belied by her own prolonged illnesses. The seeds of what Heffer calls “self-flagellatory, self-pitying guilt” that followed her death and informed Carlyle’s notes to his portrait of Jane in *Reminiscences*, were well-sown early on. His devotion to Lady Harriet Ashburton, his high attentiveness to female aristocratic temperaments even as he managed to devote precious little attention to Jane, made things all the worse: “My husband always *writing*, I always *ailing*” as she neatly put it. Her letters are filled with wonderful sequences in which she manages, through gifts of style and wit, to make the intolerable into something less threatening, indeed amusing, as in an early letter to her aunt written just after the publication of *Sartor*:

And then there is a young American beauty—such a beauty! “snow and rose-bloom” throughout, not as to clothes merely, but complexion also; large and soft, and without one idea, you would say, to rub upon another! And this charming creature publicly declares herself his “ardent admirer,” and I heard her with my own ears call out quite passionately at parting with him, “Oh, Mr. Carlyle, I want to see you to talk a long time about—Sartor! “Sartor” of all things in this world! What could such a young lady have got to say about “Sartor,” can you imagine? And Mrs. Marsh, the moving authoress of “The Old Man’s Tales” reads “Sartor” when she is ill in bed; from which one thing at least may be clearly inferred, that her illness is not of the head. In short, my dear friend, the singular author of “Sartor” appears to me at this moment to be in a perilous position, inasmuch as (with the innocence of a sucking dove to outward appearance) he is leading honourable women, not a few, entirely off their feet. And who can say that he will keep his own? After all, in sober earnest, is it not curious that my husband’s writings should be only completely understood and adequately appreciated by women and mad people? I do not know very well what to infer from the fact.

This is marvelous, and one can see how Carlyle, coming across even such a composed piece of discontent, could have used it as more grist for his self-accusatory mill.

Readers unfamiliar with Carlyle's reminiscence of his wife should not, however, think that it is one long gloomy paean emanating from a suffering widower. Parts of it are animated by fierce humor, as in the following sketch of a "Catholic sick-nurse" brought in (but only briefly!) to care for Jane during one of her illnesses. One night Carlyle is awakened (his room was above Jane's) by her violently ringing the bell: the French nun had tried to minister to Jane with "ghostly consolations" such as, perhaps, "Blessed Virgin" or "*Agnus Dei*." The nun is dismissed next morning "never to reappear, she or any consort of hers," and Carlyle adds:

I was really sorry for this heavy-laden, pious or quasi-pious and almost broken-hearted Frenchwoman,—though we could perceive she was under the foul tutelage and guidance, probably of some dirty muddyminded semi-*felonious* Proselytising Irish Priest:—but there was no help for her, in this instance; probably, in all England, she could not have found an agonised human soul more nobly and hopelessly superior to her and her *poisoned-gingerbread* "consolations."

Here it is the poisoned-gingerbread conceit that vitalizes, in a typical manner, Carlyle's writing, as for a moment regret and guilt are put aside in favor of forceful abuse (that "semi-*felonious*" Irish priest is a particularly fine stroke).

Whatever Simon Heffer meant in his introduction by claiming that Carlyle is now in bad repute partly because his "humor" is misunderstood, it's true that, in a broad sense, Carlyle's humorous ways, and not just in writing, are what make him an appealing subject for biography: his long late-night evening gallops about London on his horse Noggs (named for a character in *Nicholas Nickleby*); or his visiting Stonehenge with Emerson on the latter's second trip to England when, Emerson writes in *English Traits*, after "they walked round the stones and clambered over them" they "found a nook, sheltered from the wind among them, where Carlyle lighted his cigar"; or his penchant for deterring oncoming colds by plunging himself into a freezing bath, evidently to successful effect—the ultimate Boy Scout maneuver.

In his late years he was summoned, along with Browning and a couple of others, to meet the Queen, and wrote afterward to his sister how she "gently acknowledged with a nod the silent deep bow of us male monsters." He described Victoria as a "comely

little lady” than whom it was “impossible to imagine a politer little woman: Nothing the least imperious; all gentle, all sincere-looking, unembarrassing, rather attractive even;—makes you feel too (if you have sense in you) that she is Queen.” Her response to him, as recorded in her journal, went as follows: “a strange-looking eccentric old Scotchman, who holds forth, in a drawling melancholy voice, with a broad Scotch accent, upon Scotland and upon the utter degeneration of everything.” Yes, we feel, they had each other right.

The hero of Wyndham Lewis’ novel *Tarr* is characterized as a sort of anti-Quixote whose “sardonic dream of life” brought him “blows from the swift arms of windmills and attacks from indignant and perplexed mankind.” Tarr possesses, is inflicted with we are told, “the curse of humour . . . anchoring him at one end of the see-saw whose movement and contradiction was life.” Carlyle was, in the same manner, humorously cursed, and never got off the seesaw until he died at eighty-five, having exhibited, so his brother-in-law commented, “such tenacity of life and vitality” as he had never observed in any human being. My single favorite moment from his writing is one in which he registered comparable tenacity in another human being, namely Wordsworth in old age, wearing his protective green eyeshade at a London dinner party amidst an atmosphere of “babble” and “cackle,” “heartily unimportant to Gods and man,” so Carlyle judges it. Seated far away at the table from Wordsworth, Carlyle suddenly looks up and sees the poet:

there, far off, beautifully screened in the shadow of his vertical green circle . . . sat Wordsworth, silent, in rock-like indifference, slowly but steadily gnawing some portion of what I judged to be raisins, with his eye and attention placidly fixed on these and these alone. The sight of whom, and of his rock-like indifference to the babble, quasi-scientific and other, with attention turned on the small practical alone, was comfortable and amusing to me, who felt like him but could not eat raisins.

The curse of dyspeptic humor, turned—especially through the raisins—into a wonderful moment of sympathetic identification, is something even the most unconvinced reader of Carlyle can admire.

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Kingdom of the Sweet

Every year the signs of Christmas turn up a little earlier and last a little longer. In my local mini-mall the department store put out the plastic wreaths and trees before they sold all the garden hoses, and citizens were encouraged to leave the lights up on their houses till Presidents' Day, to twinkle up the landscape. But you really know it's Christmas when *The Nutcracker* makes its appearance. According to a "Nutcracker Alphabet" compiled for the New York City Ballet program book by Maitland McDonagh, there are more than a hundred different versions of the ballet in America. This is a gross underestimate. The first Sunday in December the *Boston Globe* listed approximately 130 performances of 14 different productions, just in the Boston area. This list doesn't discriminate between the professional Boston Ballet version and a whole range of semiprofessional, student, civic, regional, children's, and even puppet renditions of the theme.

The Nutcracker is a ballet spectacle and a moneymaking showcase for struggling dance organizations, but I think it's more than that. It can be reconstituted in seemingly limitless ways to serve different needs and populations. Despite its roots in Imperial nineteenth-century Russia, it's become almost a folk art form in middle America. I wanted to explore what this phenomenon means, and I felt pretty certain it didn't mean the Balanchine paradigm that dominates the landscape in New York.

If I think of the New York City Ballet version, which will always be *The Nutcracker* to me, I see wonderful stage effects and contrasting moods: a family party full of loving relatives and benign surprises, snowfall in deep night woods, treats that come to life, and a flight in a sleigh with a chivalrous little boy for an escort. And ballerinas, dancing children and toys, the Christmas tree that grows as the dreaming little girl seems to shrink, and the scary/comical battle of the mice. All this, as well as the dance action, changes drastically from one version to another, but no

matter how limited the producers' resources or how diverse their goals, *The Nutcracker* gets told in essentially the same terms. Its two-part structure inverts, by magic, from a family party to a utopian fiesta where the parents are nowhere in sight. Maybe one reason little children can sit still for the second act, which has no story and virtually no mimetic action, is that it projects them into the Kingdom of the Sweets, where they can indulge their greedy appetites, their longing to be free of parental control, and their fantasies of regal indolence.

This reversal of circumstances is facilitated by the mysterious Drosselmeyer and the dolls he brings to the Stahlbaum children. Clara, the child/protagonist (for some reason the NYCB Clara is called Marie), either from over-stimulation or pre-adolescent wish fulfillment, dreams the toys to life. In a nursery tempest, they defend her against a horde of attacking mice, and after she helps their commander, the Nutcracker, defeat the Mouse King, he turns into a handsome prince. He takes her on a magic journey to his home, where it's Christmas all the time and a child can have as much candy as she wants. (The NYCB, perhaps anticipating parental objections, has replaced some of the nutritionally incorrect goodies in the second-act decor with fruit.) The characters who entertain them there are reminiscent of the party dolls but no one except the translated Nutcracker normally goes along with Clara into the second act, not even Drosselmeyer.

The party scene introduces the characters, sets up the transformation, and features social dancing ensembles of children, parents, grandparents and friends, rather than ballet dancing. Some versions omit or downplay this, perhaps to deflect one criticism that has followed *The Nutcracker* since its premiere in 1892, its lack of unity. The rift between narrative and technical display, typical of the nineteenth-century ballets, is at its most serious here. Not merely alternating story and poetry as in the acts of *Swan Lake*, or mime and dancing as in *Coppélia*, *Nutcracker* breaks into two distinct theatrical units. But the phenomenal popularity of the ballet overcomes this flaw, if it is one. One could just as well argue that the contrast between the acts is an asset, and that the galop and Grossvater dance reinforce the party's cordiality. Balanchine certainly emphasized the discrepancy, by withholding all ballet dancing, except for Drosselmeyer's mechanical dolls, until after the mouse battle and the transformation.

The party dances not only fold easily into the social atmosphere in which they occur, they make a place for dancing children. Modern *Nutcrackers* face a problem: if the first act is about children, are real children to be used in staging it, and if so, what will they be able to do? When the producing organization is backed up with a fine ballet school, as of course was the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg where *The Nutcracker* originated, the work can provide a training ground for children preparing for a professional career. Balanchine himself played various roles in this and other classics when he was a student at the then Maryinsky. In his own stagings of the nineteenth-century repertory, and sometimes in new choreography like *Mozartiana*, he made as many opportunities for children as possible. I once heard him say he felt this guaranteed at least two people in the audience for every child on the stage, but I doubt that his motives were entirely crass.

He demanded so much more dancing from them than was needed just to show them off. Stage-wise children are good at fooling around when the curtain goes up. A bigger test is whether they can actually dance. In Balanchine's *Nutcracker*, children not only act, they do two contradances in the first act, perform as mice and toy soldiers in the battle scene, and appear in the second act divertissements. From the tiny, gliding angels, to the Candy Canes and Polichinelles who have real ballet steps to do, they have to conform to the lines and focus of the group, maintain spatial patterns, preserve musical accuracy, and stay in character in front of an audience.

Unfortunately, many dance teachers follow Balanchine's example without his resources. On public access TV one night last Christmas season, some small automatons wove across a strip of stage in front of the local symphony orchestra, captured in fuzzy focus by a stationary camera. These products of a dancing school in the area labored joylessly through several *Nutcracker* divertissements. Some looked too young to be wearing pointe shoes, and they all looked unprepared to use them. Nervous and wobbly, lacking any notion of turnout, they struggled to stab their legs into the floor and execute the shapes they were assigned. I imagine recitals like this go on everywhere. Of course, a dotting audience loves them no matter what.

Boston's enterprising James Reardon, director of the Boston

Dance Company, doesn't have a major school to supply a juvenile component, but he's worked out a decent, full-stage *Nutcracker* that cycles several communities into the ballet. Reardon's associate director and ballet master Clyde Nantais gathers a youthful supporting cast in each of about five suburban areas around Boston. They rehearse weekly through the fall, then give both public and school showings several times in each locale, with a basic cadre of adult dancers from the company taking care of the technical numbers.

I attended a performance one freezing morning in a barnlike auditorium at Salem State College, with about 200 bussed-in primary and middle schoolers. The production was condensed and adapted to the situation, but not unrecognizable, and it came with a program book full of advertisements that said things like: "Good Luck!! Akilah & Arantya. We are proud of you. Love, Mom & Dad." The children here were more than charming; they danced with spirit and technical ability, in choreography suited to them but not apologetic.

At one point the taped music went awry and the perky Clara, a thirteen-year-old from one of the participating dance schools, was trapped alone onstage for at least five minutes while miscued bits of music went on and off. This trooper managed to keep the fidgety audience from going out of control. Building with unerring stage instinct on the balletic situation—she was supposed to be watching the divertissements in the Kingdom of the Sweets—she gazed expectantly at the empty stage, then turned with a smile to the audience, including us in what seemed a delightful suspense. I've never seen a professional make a better recovery from a technical gaffe. Backstage, she was surrounded by a flurry of smaller girls pleading for her autograph.

Reardon's *Nutcracker* demonstrates how the ballet can be a true children's occasion, without condescending either to the children or to the ballet itself. And though the NYCB version is a fully professional ballet, it too is a family show. When I saw it in New York at a matinee, the audience comprised children and adults almost equally.

Besides the advantage of holding back on choreographed classical glamour, Balanchine's first scene balances home values against escapism. The lure of what Clara sees on her journey can't quite supersede the comforts of her own fireside. Although this

version doesn't show us Clara/Marie's return, it implies that her yen for adventure has been satisfied, and she'll be happy to wake up in the loving arms of her mother when the reindeer-sleigh reaches its destination. Balanchine's *Nutcracker*, perhaps because it doesn't show the heroine's awakening, leaves us suspended between dreaming and reality. A curiosity that appeared on BRAVO this season assumed a viewer couldn't be expected to read the events as a dream unless it literally showed her waking up safe.

One night, trolling through the channels in mid-November, I snagged the end of an anonymous *Nutcracker* that BRAVO was apparently screening several times. I wouldn't have known what it was except for the music. It had that gelatinous look of early-television ballet: orange crinkly cellophane sets, fluffy tutus with satin bodices, and dancing hunched into a performance space no bigger than a nightclub. The dancers had the smooth, impassive faces of mannequins, but my first reaction was "Melissa Hayden!" "Edward Villella!" I dismissed this notion; what would these stellar dancers have been doing in a vehicle like this? A few minutes later the show ended and to my amazement the credits listed Hayden, Villella, Patricia McBride, and the German modern dancer and mime Harald Kreutzberg. After a successful home taping and some research, I knew that it had been choreographed for Bavarian TV by the German freelancer Kurt Jacob sometime in the early 1960s.

On full viewing, the Jacob version proved to be the most revisionist of all the *Nutcrackers* I saw this season. Compressed to fit a one-hour format, but determined to supply a post-party plot, it has Drosselmeyer alias Uncle Alex (Kreutzberg, trying, I suppose, to look mysterious but only looking sedated) taking Marie (McBride) and the Nutcracker (Villella) on a sleigh ride to find the young man's lost home. They encounter some of the usual divertissements on the way—rechoreographed without distinction—plus what looks like a complete Bluebird pas de deux from *Sleeping Beauty*, danced by Niels Kehlet of the Royal Danish Ballet and the German ballerina Helga Heinrich. Eventually the travelers come to a palace with golden doors. Inside is the Sugarplum Fairy (Hayden), who turns out to be none other than the Nutcracker's mother. After she "changes him back to what he was before—a prince," according to the voiceover, they dance the

grand pas de deux together. The duet fades out on Marie as a child, waking up in bed with the *Nutcracker* in her arms. "It was all a dream," says the narrator, "and no one would ever know. Except maybe Uncle Alex." Kreutzberg hovers next to the bed, and he and Marie share a wink.

This tintype *Nutcracker* is fun to watch, the way minor silent movies are. It offers first of all the rare pleasure of revisiting dancers in their vanished youth. Despite the cramped choreography, you can still see McBride's luxurious stretch, Villella's eager elegance, and Hayden's strength and poise. The video also shows us how far dance on TV has come in thirty years. Jacob's capsule version of the ballet does somehow hang onto the main elements, cleansed of all subliminal eroticism and danger. There aren't even any mice. As Tchaikovsky's mouse music plays, the trio are sailing along in the sleigh, and the narrator talks about the "strange creatures" they see below them. They encounter storms and a flock of bluebirds, done with animation, but nothing scarier than the music intrudes on the screen.

Television at its most conventional is a story medium, trying for the intimacy and realism of the movies. Early TV dance gave up on trying to reproduce the spectacular aspects of ballet and often brought whatever narrative there was to the foreground. Jacob and the German producers center their *Nutcracker* around the protagonists, with reaction shots, closeups, and lots of non-dance activity. As much as possible the camera encloses people in a steady tracking shot and avoids the constantly shifting space-body relationships that occur during dancing. The production is really a *divertissement*, without shadows or revelations, a passing pleasantry, like "I Dream of Jeannie."

Balanchine's *Nutcracker* is also stress-free and deeply middle-class, but also deeply glamorous. When the NYCB finally filmed it in 1993, in an adaptation by Peter Martins, it pulled back slightly into a romanticized subtext. Clara/Marie's dream is touched off by a crush on the nephew, played with embarrassing affectation by the boy actor Macaulay Culkin. All the gender-specific aspects of the party scene, which the NYCB has been trying to downplay in recent years, glare out of the video. Boys always dance with girls and failing that, their mother. As presents, the boys get drums and the girls get dolls. The boys are aggressive, the girls simpery and fearful. In other small ways, including a

redundant narration by Kevin Kline, the video seems to be pandering to a conservative audience.

Producers with a more modern turn of mind have probed the relationships between Clara, Drosselmeyer, and the Nutcracker-boy-prince to uncover troublesome but trendy issues of motivation, conflict and desire. Drosselmeyer and Clara may have some subliminal sexual attraction for each other. Incestual implications can be raised, then safely sidestepped by transferring Clara's affections to the Nutcracker. He is, after all, only a toy, although in the dream the reincarnated Nutcracker is often played by the same child who comes to the party as Drosselmeyer's nephew. Some choreographers have suggested a more-than-familial bond between this boy and his uncle, or a rivalry between them for the nascent affections of Clara. The potential for triangular interplay becomes further complicated when Clara is played by an adult dancer. But I doubt if these racy undercurrents add much appeal for the children in the audience, whose fantasy world encompasses exploding space ships, dismembered robots, and sportive battering, but not psychological intricacy.

Essentially every *Nutcracker* is an interpretation. Even the Balanchine version, which we consider the most authentic we have today, was retrieved in 1954 from the choreographer's memory of the versions he knew before leaving Russia in 1924, and it has since gone through another four decades of evolution. *Nutcracker* is not like Handel's *Messiah*, which may differ from performance to performance in instrumentation, vocal forces, and expressive style but will almost always consist of the same notes, in the same order. Not even the score of *The Nutcracker* remains intact to the same degree, let alone the staging. Composed to the prescription of the ballet master, Marius Petipa, the score is laid out in a series of scenes that have musical relationships but no overall symphonic structure. Parts of it get moved around or omitted or laced with swatches from other ballets. Nobody thinks a thing about it.

Each new *Nutcracker* is a creative challenge, an attempt to uncover what the ballet might mean in a way that pleases both children and adults. Provided it keeps hold of the basic ingredients, we're prepared to become innocents or sophisticates; we're ready for almost any amount of patchwork, embroidery, or redesign. The Boston Ballet version, reconceived by artistic

director Bruce Marks and choreographed by Marks and Daniel Pelzig, seems like one of those nineteenth-century musical exhibition pieces, a rhapsody or a fantasia on the theme of *Nutcracker*. It's not that the ballet is gone, but that so much has been tucked in around it you can hardly recognize it.

As the overture plays, a tableau of assorted Dickensian characters parades across the front of the stage, most of them making no further appearance in the ballet. I suppose this is meant to set a tone for the story. All I could think of was the Balanchine version, where during the entire overture nothing happens. We simply look at a drop painted with a village of snowy rooftops and a heralding angel, and listen to the music. Similarly, at the beginning of the second act, Boston gives us a panorama of angels, smoke, moving scenery, props, landscapes and characters, while Balanchine, to the same music, offers tiny angels in long white dresses skimming along in clean linear formations.

Rather than hone down to the bedrock, which was always Balanchine's instinct when revisiting the nineteenth century, Marks builds, elaborates, overloads the idea. Wherever possible there are two of something instead of one, people upstaging other people, byplay off in the corners. Drosselmeyer, a batlike apparition in a huge flapping cape, is shadowed, literally, by his nephew, who dresses the same way and imitates his movements. Since the nephew neither turns into the Nutcracker nor reappears after the party scene, the doubling device is simply clutter. Drosselmeyer, on the other hand, is in charge of the action till the end. What were just parlor tricks at the party become supernatural powers. Not only can he transform the room and the toys, he tells Clara what to do in the mouse war, commandeers transportation, and makes the whole second act happen. The divertissements aren't gifts from the Sugarplum Fairy but animated denizens of Drosselmeyer's toy theater.

The Boston *Nutcracker* seems afraid to leave anything alone. The party scene is a tumble of tricks and schticks, a disapproving governess and a tiptling maid, a larger-than-lifesize toy bear, a clownish grandmother. Amid the constant activity, the remains of the traditional story are hard to detect, and the audience is encouraged to abandon those simple lines in anticipation of the next coup de théâtre, and the next. The production is highly touted for its expensive sets and effects, and the audience is

meant to feel thrilled by them. As if Clara and the Nutcracker couldn't get all the way to the "Palace of the Sweets" in the sleigh, Drosselmeyer transfers them to a decorated balloon, and then soars up after them on his own wire. The mice not only fight with the dolls, they dance in a troll-like ring around the Nutcracker, they are obsessed with food, and they do a rickety version of the clichéd four little swans from *Swan Lake*.

It's nearly impossible to settle down from all this and look at dancing in the second act. After Clara and the Nutcracker are ushered into fake stage boxes, they watch the divertissements emerge from a stage within the stage, against new backdrops representing each country of origin. What I noticed about the choreography—I think the Soviets started this—is how most of the numbers had shaken down to conventional partnered ballet turns. In some, a principal couple was flanked by a complementary ensemble: umbrella-twirling children for the Chinese, fluffy little lambs for the Marzipan. In most, a male partner or a small male cohort steadied and lifted a woman soloist with various site-specific quirks. Since there's also an added pas de deux couple in the Snowflakes scene, the production gives out a major message that partnering is what traditional ballet is about.

Balanchine was hardly one to stint on partner work, but his second act ranges in scale from the slinky solo woman in Coffee (the Arabian dance) to the three Chinese to a female quintet (Marzipan), the hoop-twirling Candy Canes, and finally the big women's group Waltz of the Flowers. He even detaches the dance of the Sugarplum Fairy (the famous celesta music) from the grand pas de deux and relocates it as a solo, presented before Clara and the Nutcracker arrive. This shift gives the Sugarplum greater autonomy. Her dancing skills don't need to be displayed or assisted by any partner. For Balanchine, dancing itself is a variety show, a spectacle with many facets. You could almost read the whole second act as a subtle lesson in the way dancers, and dancing itself, can develop from the simplest childish beginnings to the majestic ensemble of Flowers and the virtuosics of the pas de deux.

Marks and Pelzig's *Nutcracker* is like a big bazaar, with Drosselmeyer as the pitchman for the attractions within. In a way, it's also the central booth in the larger marketplace that's selling the Boston Ballet to the public. *Nutcrackers* everywhere capitalize on

the popularity of the Christmas perennial to pull in the biggest audiences; it's no secret that *The Nutcracker* often subsidizes a ballet company's whole operation for the year. In Boston this promotion has reached a level of expertise that rivals the stage performance itself. Beginning with the company's enthusiastic director, Bruce Marks, *The Nutcracker* is first hyped from within. The local media then take up the cry, and the process loops around for weeks, with feature stories, interviews, film clips on TV news, more press releases, special events eliciting more coverage. Most of this isn't paid for, but the city is also plastered with ads and special ticket offers. When the ballet finally began its run of 52 performances, local papers frontpaged the reviews. The ballet generates hype; the hype makes the ballet seem more hypeworthy.

Boston Ballet, like its siblings around the country, creates spinoff products and occasions to generate additional revenues: a *Nutcracker* gala ball, a storybook, an audiotape of the music with sound effects. The New York City Ballet features not only a boutique full of toys, games, books, Advent calendars, tapes, and videos; you can have your child's picture taken with a Snowflake. During the intermission, a corps de ballet dancer in costume will pose for a \$20 instant photo, and you get her autograph thrown in.

Boston Ballet's hyperbole circus reached its height when the local headlines started calling it "the most popular in the world," evidently upgrading Bruce Marks's ambiguous program note: "*The Nutcracker*, the mainstay of Boston Ballet, is the most attended ballet performance in the world." José Mateo's Ballet Theatre of Boston retaliated by advertising its modest but dreary version as the one you went to for the dancing. In any case, a month after the season ended, Boston Ballet officials admitted that revenues had been lower than anticipated this year.

To stage *The Nutcracker* now, a company either risks a yawn-inducing traditional version, or breaks the bank on new spectacle and effects. One more possibility, no less hazardous than the others, is deconstruction; that is, pulling apart the texts (story, dancing, music) and putting them back together in an entirely different framework. Deconstructions are tricky. Expensive but not necessarily durable, they take tremendous imagination, a real idea. Mark Morris' pop-art *The Hard Nut* (1991), set in the

sexually liberated 1970s, had a few years of successful touring, but seems to be out of circulation now. This season, *The Harlem Nutcracker* arrived at Brooklyn Academy after a brief national tour. It deserves a longer life.

Choreographer-director Donald Byrd not only transplanted the scenario to a contemporary setting in an African-American family, he reconceived the plot quite drastically. The original *Nutcracker* is a rite of passage. In Clara's dream, she begins the process of growing up, and confronts the sexual demands of adulthood through the possible roles she assigns to the prince and Drosselmeyer. Donald Byrd sees the whole story through the eyes of a grandmother, and her journey as a look back on her loving relationship with her husband. At the end, she is ready to join him in death. The one mysterious character is Death himself, enticing Clara to let go of her comfortable home and pass gracefully into another existence.

With this as a premise, the elements fall into place. At a Christmas party attended by her large family, Clara withdraws into reverie. Her dead husband appears with a toy nutcracker he gave her long ago, and she dances with him in her dream. Clara's children and neighbors, an assortment of amusing character types, dance and visit the punch bowl; a band of carolers troop in and sing a gospel chorus; the grandchildren dance an exuberant frug-macarena-hip-hop number with arm movements borrowed from the traditional toy soldiers.

One of the most ingratiating things about this production is the score, an expansion by arranger-composer David Berger of the 1962 Duke Ellington-Billy Strayhorn *Nutcracker Suite*, which inspired Donald Byrd to revamp the ballet. Berger preserves the well-known Ellington sound, but the Tchaikovsky themes are all inside it and all in the right places. The big-band beat drives the whole performance, and dictates the dance styles.

The production is generous, with wonderful costumes, visions, transformations. Byrd wasn't so successful with the obligatory but often intractable mice—here they're grey lumpy devils, accomplices of Death. What he did do splendidly was Clara and the Nutcracker's arrival at Club Sweets, in a taxi. Dressed in evening clothes, they're ushered into the fabulously lighted doorway by fawning attendants. This was as magical a stage effect as any second-act opener I've seen. The divertissements were done in

tab show style—trashy, flashy, and fun. Throughout the ballet, Byrd put the women in high-heel shoes. Perhaps an uptown version of the pointe shoe, the three-inch spike must be at least as demanding to dance in as classical ballet footwear.

The shoes, and the other finery in which the production is dressed, create a kind of glamour we readily recognize. So does the dancing, and the other ways people behave. Although Byrd's choreography lacks the inventive nuance of the Balanchine model, the vernacular chorus lines and raunchy comic turns in the second act make perfect sense in the smart ambience of Clara's flashback to the Harlem Renaissance.

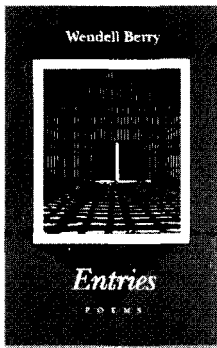
Despite the down-and-dirty club acts and the misbehaving party guests, the underlying tone of this *Nutcracker* is one of warmth and affection. I think that's what the *Nutcracker* stands for, why the ballet survives, but we often can sense it only in token gestures, almost absent-mindedly inserted between virtuosic effects. Byrd's production style is consistently approachable without being mundane. The characters and the dancing are real, but they're not so simple they could be any one of us in the audience. Flamboyant and sexy in ways ballet is too stylized to convey, *The Harlem Nutcracker* is a contemporary romance, like an Astaire and Rogers movie. When Clara and the Nutcracker (Eleanor McCoy and Gus Solomons, Jr.) drift into a slow foxtrot in the first act, the attraction between them is palpable. And what a lovely thing it is to see two older dancers, portraying even older characters, dancing with such regard. More often the *Nutcracker* grandparents are stiff and dotty caricatures.

Donald Byrd says he wants his *Nutcracker* to invoke basic ideas of love and respect, to counter the negative picture we often get of African-American family life, and without being preachy he achieves that. In fact, I think his ballet falters only when he counterpoints the darker aspects. Death, perhaps his stand-in for Drosselmeyer, symbolizes Clara's fear of the unknown. In the scariest hallucination, near the end, he makes her look at a tableau of violent happenings, perhaps out of her past. Crime and danger do stalk the Harlem streets, but their actual depiction seems unnecessary. Drosselmeyer/Death and the mice stand for all the terrors from which Clara's strong family network will insulate and protect her.

Long after any viewing of *The Nutcracker*, we retain these images,

of celebration, of dreaming, and of successful journeying. How Clara imagines herself in the fairy tale world, what kind of power Drosselmeyer wields over her, whether she grows up at the end or reverts to childhood—or dies—these fasten themselves in the audience's memory the way movie patterns do. The role models may be deeply conservative or parodistic, or intentionally idealized. The dancing may be classical or exotic or contemporary, highly polished or humbly aspiring. But through its long history of renovation, deconstruction, downsizing and upscaling, its amplifications and simplifications and shifts to new locales, *The Nutcracker* always seems to revolve around an idea of a stable, sustaining home. Our own lives may be different, but we make the annual pilgrimage to reassure ourselves, to satisfy this primal longing, if only in the theater.

Poetry, fiction, and essays from Wendell Berry



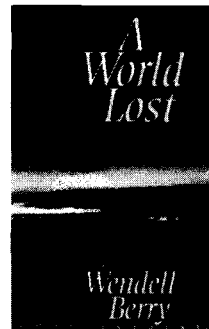
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JULIE KEITH

Kevin

Around the time my brother Kevin got his driver's license and began to shave once or even twice a week, my mother fell in love with him. Kevin was older than I and something of a star. At our high school, he ran pep rallies for the football games and sock hops on Saturday nights, and in the spring he played catcher on the baseball team—he wasn't big enough for football—and he bestowed on people a quirky, optimistic smile that made them happy.

He made my mother happy too. She was the kind of woman who brightened around men, and her face would flush when he came into the room. After dinner, when my father was reading in the living room and she and I were doing the dishes, Kevin would sit on the big white kitchen table talking and swinging his legs back and forth. He chipped the enamel off the table legs doing this, but my mother never complained. Swathed like a nurse in apron and rubber gloves, she whisked around him bearing leftovers to the refrigerator and dishes to the sink, all the while providing little nods and mm-hmms and clickings of her tongue. She asked him questions about football scores and baseball statistics. "What about Koufax?" she would say, touching his arm with the tips of her rubbered fingers. "What about our Red Sox?" Boy things, things I knew she didn't care about.

Other times she just watched him—he had a shambling, loose-kneed way of moving—and her eyes would stay on him while he was loping up the stairs or slapping together a sandwich or ambling out the door to pick up a date. Of course, she didn't like any of his girlfriends.

After graduation Kevin went to Boston College. He lasted until the fall of his third year, until one Friday afternoon to be exact. I'd just finished my homework when the doorbell rang—Kevin could never find his key—and there he was on the front stoop

surrounded by stuffed laundry bags and cartons of records and another piled high with baseball things. “Hi,” was all he said. A fine wind was blowing up from the harbor, and it riffled his dark hair as he stood there. I could see his chest protector and his bats poking out of one carton, and sitting on top of his transistor, the big leather saucer that was his catcher’s mitt. These were his most precious possessions, and I understood that he wasn’t going back to Boston College. The friend who had delivered him and his worldly goods must have known too because he was already backing his battered Plymouth down the driveway with considerable speed.

My mother walked in from the kitchen while we were dragging his stuff indoors. Her hands, which had something white stuck to the knuckles, dropped to her sides. “Darling!” I can still hear the joy in her brilliant high-pitched voice. Her face went crimson, then as she registered his news, slowly emptied. Tired of studying, tired of books, his explanations were offered with baffled good cheer. He didn’t himself seem to know why he’d wanted out. My mother began to look as if she might cry, though I knew she wouldn’t.

“Tired of books?” my father said to him that night and then shook his head, rejecting this incredible notion. “Only a cretin gets tired of books.”

It would turn out to be all he had to say on the subject. They were standing in the living room at the time. My father, who’d been heading toward his favorite chair, was holding a book, his forefinger inserted in the pages. I remember the smile curling up Kevin’s face as he noticed this, and the way he draped an arm over my father’s shoulder, indulgently as though he understood my father and forgave him his abstraction, his will to live his life apart from us. They were the same height standing there, but Kevin’s arms and legs were longer.

My mother remained profoundly disappointed. “All those smart Jesuits, and the college right over there in Chestnut Hill . . .” But unlike my father she didn’t give up. “What about Fordham? Did you think of writing them? Or Notre Dame? Indiana’s not the farthest place . . .” In the bright snap of her voice, I heard how much she hated those potential miles between herself and him. “Or that other one. Georgetown. What about

Georgetown?” She had a new suggestion every day. I think Kevin was not sorry to get his draft notice.

The year and a half while he was in Viet Nam must have caused her agony, though she never spoke of it. By then I too had graduated. My boyfriend had another view of the draft, and after a stint at Boston Secretarial College, I followed him north to the shore of the St. Lawrence River. There, in a city I knew only from travel posters, I found a job typing and filing invoices in the office of a furniture store. I spoke no French, but another girl answered the telephones and my boss didn't care what I spoke as long as my letters were neat and quickly done and he could pay me less than minimum wage and under the table.

Around the corner from the store, the greystone parish church loomed, solemn and paternal, over the neighborhood, its stone towers strangely hollow in appearance, though at various hours bells rang out from them. St-François Xavier the church was called, and at lunch hour, or sometimes after work, I used to creep into its dim and rather damp interior to say a prayer for Kevin. My mother did not question what I was doing in Canada. A boyfriend was a boyfriend, after all, following him a reasonable thing to do. Getting married, after all, was a girl's business. (I did not press upon her the information that I was actually living with him.) She wrote me that she lit a candle each day in our church for my brother and that she knew he would be fine because he was Kevin. In nearly every letter she wrote this, as though it would be traitorous to think otherwise. And I believed her, as I believed her about most things.

The way my mother told it afterwards, she was sitting at the telephone. In those days telephones didn't travel around from room to room. There weren't very many of them in a house either, one for the ground floor, maybe one upstairs (if there was an upstairs), placed on the table between the parents' twin beds. Our phone resided in the front hall. A shiny, black pyramid set like an icon on a little mahogany table. The table was meant for this purpose. It had spindly legs and a shelf underneath for the telephone book. It had also a matching, upright chair of comparable spindliness. It was on this that my mother was perched. She was a short woman with a flat girdled fanny, and she would have

been wearing stockings and high-heeled shoes and a straight tweed skirt (the kind that would have had a matching tweed jacket hanging in her closet). This was what she wore for an ordinary day. The jacket was added if she had to go out to the grocery store or the dry cleaners or sometimes to a Catholic Daughters meeting. I do not remember ever seeing her in pants.

That particular day, she was chatting with a friend when she saw the grey Chevrolet pull up outside. The Marine officer driving it was in full-dress uniform. Since my brother had joined the Marines, she had learned the officers' uniforms, and she could see this one clearly through the windows on either side of the door. He had just started up the walk, this officer, when she said to her friend—in a voice as calm, the friend told us later, as if the milkman, bottles clinking in his metal basket, were arriving at the door—"I've got to go now, dear. Kevin's been killed."

Kevin died on the jungle floor in the company of a second lieutenant. This lieutenant wrote us about it, how Kevin lay in his arms and how he said nothing but after a while died. A helicopter had dropped them into the clearing that had turned out to be an ambush, and I guess another took them out, as they then were, some living, others, like Kevin, bodies merely.

It wasn't clear to us from reading Kevin's letters, or the ones we got afterwards from his Marine friends, what their mission was. He and his platoon seemed to be dropped into one bosky glen or another to fight each day, then collected at the end of the afternoon like a remote work crew. Perhaps in some fragmented way he enjoyed these outings. He had written that he loved being out-of-doors, that he thought he could never live an indoor life again. He did not speak in his letters—the last three came after his death—of fighting, but of friends, of the past, recalling the time he and my father painted the garage, the time he found a library book missing for years under his bed, and he wrote even more often of the future. He made plans in the letters. He would study forestry or agriculture, live on a mountain in Oregon or in Maine.

We three were Catholics, my mother, Kevin and I. All through my childhood, we'd eaten fish on Friday night and gone weekly to mass, my mother and I with scarves in our coat pockets to tie over

our heads, my brother galloping on ahead like an unleashed dog. I remember even as a child praying for my father, unredeemed as he was. Not only had he never converted, despite long years of good Catholic influence, but he was unperturbed by this failure. I can still see him glancing over his reading glasses as we fidgeted about in the front hall getting ready to leave. His smile, crooked like Kevin's, flashed over us with amusement. My mother, spotting this, bristled. "You might come with us once in a while, make a decent example." Her gaze swivelled toward Kevin, and I could see the anger growing in her quick eyes. But my father's expression remained one of amiable disinterest. It occurred to me then that he didn't really care what my mother thought, and this gave me a funny sensation in my stomach, as if I had recently eaten something that was not likely to stay down. Far better, I felt then, if he would behave like other fathers, pound the chair arm, shout orders at her. "Now, Rosie," he was saying in his flat, unconcerned voice, "we can't all be saved at once." He'd gone back to reading a book called *Their Finest Hour* before we got out the door.

Perhaps in compensation, my mother had always hoped for Kevin's faith to increase in strength. The Church was what she'd had in mind. "And why not? A priest counts for more than anyone." This would be said with a sharp glance at my father, deep in his book. "A priest can go anywhere. Look at that Father Drinan, gone down to be in Congress . . ." If Kevin's departure from Boston College took her by surprise, the diversion of war was a raging shock, the Marines not being remotely includable in her plans. A Jesuit for a son, that was what she'd had in mind, a son backed up by that ultimate bossy male, God himself.

We held the funeral on a bright windy day in April. I'd taken a bus down from Montreal. My boyfriend could not come with me, of course, and following my parents up the church steps, I had the sense that I'd returned to an earlier, more daughterly time. From the top of the stairs we could see the rock promontory for which our town was named and the long narrow wash of blue where the harbor inserted itself into the land. My mother was proud that our town was an old fishing village, with its fleet and its proper historical past, but she feared the water as much as she admired its presence. As far as I know, she never swam a stroke. My father and Kevin, on the other hand, loved to sail. They went out

weekends and sometimes after supper in the long light of early summer. From my post up there on the church steps, I felt as though I should be watching for their dinghy to come sliding around the rock, leaning from the wind, as it headed toward home and my mother and me. Kevin's body had been sent back to us in a military casket, and at the end of the service when the Marines bore it out, treading the aisle of the church with stiff-legged precision, my mother began to shake. I put my arm around her, and my father took her elbow and we walked out like that behind the long grey box that contained the debris of my brother.

Afterwards, my mother made little protest when I left the Church. Perhaps she, like me, felt Kevin's death had sucked from the cavernous, candle-lit interior the very spirit of male domination in which she believed and had taught me to believe. Or perhaps to her it simply didn't matter what faith claimed her female child, faith in the grander sense not being a female issue. She lived for three more decades, and other sorrows befell her—she lost a breast to the surgeon's knife and my father to a massive stroke—and she garnered some triumphs too. My little Canadian son loved her above all other creatures, and she bore him off on special granny trips to the seashore and the mountains and when he was a teenager to Rome. In our town she retained, long after the war, the crown of a martyr-mother, triumphant as much in her refusal to mourn as in her unrequitable loss. Though she waxed intermittently snappish about the Church, she remained a stalwart there too, the way she'd remained with my father perhaps, out of habit and social need. Priests came often to her home. They made, as she said in that vivacious, slightly angry voice of hers, admirable dinner guests.

I went quite often to visit her, driving my own car now through the flat fields of southern Quebec, then angling east and south across Vermont and New Hampshire down to the outer edge of Boston. There, with a line of miniature skyscrapers pricking the horizon, I turned north and followed the old road around to the sea. Our town remained familiar to my eyes; the changes as they came seemed small. My mother sold our house on the side of the hill and bought a condo down near the harbor. The view, of boats and the temperamental water, suited her, she said. "That ocean's

a menace. Up over the rocks last week.” This was said proudly, while she was handing over a full teacup with her shaky hands. “Mind you don’t spill,” she added. She’d poured in a small tot of rum, and she did the same now for her own cup. The rum was in a little white pitcher. Catching my surprise, she became brisk. “Quiets my hand, you know. That stupid tremor the doctors can’t get rid of.” I nodded but knew better than to smile.

My mother had become a peppy, bright-eyed, and occasionally mean old lady, and she could still make her displeasure felt. She still wore her tweed suits too. She was wearing one now as we sat in her living room surrounded by the furniture from our old house. My father’s chair had been slipcovered in a flowered chintz, and there were framed photographs, of Kevin in his uniform and of me in my white organdy confirmation dress and another of herself and my dark-haired son standing in bright sunlight just outside one of the long colonnades that flank the Vatican.

Through her picture window, I could see the choppy grey water of the harbor. I drank my tea—the rum was aromatic as perfume, and she was telling me a tale about one of her widow friends—and I thought then how certain she was and how willful, and yet it seemed to me that not anything she had willed around us here, not the afternoon tea nor the harbor view nor the new condo itself, was for her anything more than an after-act, an epilogue. All about us, like a brighter-lit scene, I could feel that long ago moment in our front hall on that long ago morning. That, it seemed to me, was the quintessential moment of her existence. The center of her life.

Even nowadays when I think of her, I think of her there. I think of that instant when she knew, absolutely knew, Kevin was dead, and she sat clear and apart in the hallway while her friend’s voice rattled in her ear and the Marine officer came up the walk, that instant, before sorrow struck, when she knew she would never lose her son to another woman.

Pride

The morning of the party, as Sister Anne was hurrying out of Eddie's Supermarket with the boy carrying the cake box at her heels, she happened to look up and notice the clouds beyond Roland Avenue. They were magnificent clouds, shaded underneath and brilliant white above—just like the clouds, Anne was thinking, that roll beneath the feet of the Virgin in famous old paintings, the kind you'd expect would have angels tumbling from them.

It was the twenty-seventh of March, a cold but sunny day in the fourth week of Lent. Anne was feeling magnificent herself, for the entire morning had been taken up—and in fact the entire afternoon ahead of her would be taken up too—in preparation for Sister Regina's party. The twenty-seventh of March was the fortieth anniversary of Sister Regina's vows.

Sister Regina, once the indomitable supervisor of pediatrics who could never be convinced to leave the wards at night and go to bed, was now truly bedridden, so undone by cancer that they had moved her out of the hospital and back into her own room in the convent. Though it seemed there was nothing left to do but see to her comforts until the end, there was the matter of the anniversary. And Anne was determined that there would be festivities to mark the day. She had even invited Sister Regina's niece and her husband. They had thought it a wonderful idea, and were driving all the way down from Philadelphia.

Anne had been busy since early morning. Right after Mass, she had called Henry from maintenance and he had helped her move some of the furniture out of the convent parlor. The plan was that after dinner—corned beef and cabbage, Sister Regina's favorite—they would push her out there in her bed and have a party. Not a big party, of course, because Sister Regina tired so easily now, but a party nevertheless, with white balloons and a large banner, which had been signed by over a hundred of Sister

Regina's friends, tacked across the front windows, the ones looking out on the hospital. In the old days, a party would have been out of the question during Lent. Anne was glad that things had loosened up somewhat, in that respect at least.

As for the cake, Anne had consulted with Mary Fran, who cooked for the sisters, and they had decided on a really big one—a sheet cake. There had to be enough to send slices over for both the evening and the night shifts on the pediatric floor. They had ordered it from Eddie's, the only bakery in the city they could trust to fill their request to the letter: a good yellow cake, white butter-cream icing, and in the center a heart-shaped garland of simple pastel flowers. There were to be none of those big garish roses. They had put their heads together and come up with the perfect verse for inside the garland: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Sister Mary Regina, R.S.M.—40 Years!* But the woman in Eddie's bakery had a better idea—just the name and *40 Years* inside the heart, and the rest of the writing across the bottom. "Less cluttered," she had said, and she was right, of course.

Eddie's had done such a beautiful job—Anne's heart was overflowing. She had the boy place the cake box carefully in the back of her station wagon, tipped him a dollar, and firmly closed the tailgate herself.

She was standing at the curb, waiting for a small brown pickup truck to pass, when she was startled by a short beep. The truck pulled up beside her, and the driver, a young man in a red baseball cap, rolled down his window.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm looking for the Rotunda."

Anne respected good directions. It was she who chauffeured the other sisters around. In fact, she was such a solid driver—never an accident in thirty years behind the wheel—that few people realized her sense of direction was actually rather poor. It was a weakness for which she had compensated with vigilance. Once, after struggling to comprehend the traffic reports on the radio, she had even taken the time to diagram for herself the direction of the inner loop versus the outer loop on the beltway.

But the way to the Rotunda she knew. She knew it like the back of her hand because, up until a few weeks ago when there had been that sudden turn for the worse, she had driven Sister Regina

back and forth to see a doctor at the Rotunda nearly every other week.

"Well first," she said, "you're going to have to turn around and go the other way." But she hesitated, wanting to get it right. In the meantime, the woman in the car behind the truck gave Anne an exasperated look before she whipped out into the other lane.

"I've been up and down this road twice now," said the driver of the pickup. He shook a piece of yellow notebook paper in her direction as some kind of proof. "They said the Rotunda was right on Roland Avenue. This is Roland Avenue, isn't it?"

"Well, this is Roland Avenue all right," Anne said. "But the Rotunda isn't exactly on Roland. Close to Roland, yes. But not exactly on it."

He pushed his cap back. "Terrific," he said. "How do I get there—exactly?"

"Well, like I said," she continued, repeating herself, in order to get it right, "you'll have to pull into the parking lot up there, turn around and go back down Roland the other way." She frowned and pointed south with her whole arm. At least the people in the other cars would see that this was no casual chat blocking one lane in front of Eddie's, but a case of someone in need of directions. "And after a few blocks you'll come to Cold Spring Lane."

"Yeah, Cold Spring," he said, brightening. "I passed that intersection two times. Was I supposed to turn there?"

"No." Anne shook her head to make sure he got it. "You do not want to turn on Cold Spring. Go straight. But after Cold Spring you'll pass a tower. Do you remember passing a tower?" She had stepped up to the window of his truck. She could see now he was no more than a kid. Maybe only eighteen years old, about the age of her nephew Kevin.

"Yeah, I passed that two times too," he said.

"Well then, do you remember that after that tower the road sort of splits? Roland Avenue goes off the right. You have to stay in the right lane and go right."

"Gotcha," he said. "I did that the first time."

"Yes, but you see there's one more turn you have to make." She was talking to him now just the way she would talk to her nephew Kevin—kindly, but emphatically, because she knew from experience that sometimes young people don't hear everything.

They've got their minds on other things. Or maybe they're nervous, like this one might be, since he was probably supposed to be delivering something for somebody, and now had gotten himself lost.

"After the road splits you have to turn right on the very next street. And then you'll see the Rotunda—in that first block."

"Gotcha. And thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome," Anne said, and she smiled at him. "Just remember, the Rotunda is not exactly on Roland Avenue."

The boy smiled too, waved his piece of yellow paper at her again, and was off. A moment later, when Anne drove past the parking lot, she was pleased to see the truck turning around in order to go the other way, just as she had instructed.

She was so pleased with herself then, as she drove north under those magnificent clouds in the bright blue sky, that she punched the buttons on the radio until she found a lively song with a thumping beat. First the beautiful cake with the pastel garland, and then the sweet face of a boy in the brown pickup truck. It was good, she was thinking, to be in the right place at the right time, and to do the work of the Lord even in the smallest of ways. She supposed the boy would be heading happily down Roland Avenue now, probably fiddling with his radio too.

For the briefest of moments then, she let herself delight in the part she had played so well at the curb in front of Eddie's. To the boy, nervous and lost, she had appeared at just the right the time—a nice lady in a blue coat, a nice lady who had dispensed the right directions. She pictured him crossing Cold Spring, passing the tower, and staying to the right where the road split. She pictured him turning at the very next light.

Had she said "Right"?

Anne glanced at her side mirror. She thought she saw a speck of brown. She knew she had said "Right," because she could hear her own voice in her head, her own voice delivering that peculiarly satisfying echo of the second "right" immediately after the first.

But the poor boy was supposed to turn left after the split in the road—left.

It was too late. Anne's imagination careened toward that moment when the brown pickup truck slowed down after the turn, anticipating the Rotunda in vain. And then there was the

impact of the look on the boy's face the moment he realized that the stupid old woman in the blue coat had sent him the wrong way.

One moment her heart was leaping with the realization of her error. The next moment she was desperately attempting to undo it. She would turn around, catch up with him, and set things right. But in order to turn around she had to get quickly into the left lane. She was looking in her rearview mirror, calculating whether or not it were even possible to overtake him before he got to the light, when—she never did find out why—the car in front of her suddenly braked. Anne somehow didn't brake herself in time, and there was that heart-sickening bump. From that point on, things took a dark turn.

She had to endure the wrath of a woman in a brand new white convertible with a blue top. She had to endure the name-calling—"stupid bitch"—even after she had three times in rapid succession said how very sorry she was, and that it was entirely her fault.

"You're damn right, it's your fault, you stupid bitch," the woman said. "Jesus. I don't even have permanent tags yet."

And she had to endure the humiliation of standing in the middle of Roland Avenue while the gawkers moved slowly by, taking it all in—the poor little thing in the old Buick wagon versus the blonde spitfire in the brand new convertible.

Anne held up pretty well. She felt a bit rubbery in the knees and her hands were shaking badly, but she managed to stay calm. Actually there was very little damage to either car. The woman was quick to discover a tiny graze in the solid black bumper of her convertible, but even she declared, once she had calmed down and looked again, that you could hardly see it. As for the station wagon, there was a slight grimace to the chrome now, and the license plate was bent—but that was all. Anne had been very fortunate indeed—blessed—and for this she gave thanks the whole way home.

It wasn't until she was pulling into the convent drive that she remembered Sister Regina's cake. And when she saw Mary Fran hurrying out to meet her—all smiles, her white apron flapping in the wind—Anne suffered that awful bump on Roland Avenue all over again. Only this time she imagined the cake sliding and the beautiful butter-cream icing smacking against the side of the box.

She turned off the ignition, put her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

"Sister Anne! Darlin'—what happened?" Mary Fran cried, flinging the car door open and throwing her arms around her.

It all rushed out—how she had picked up the cake just fine, how she had bumped into someone, how it was entirely her fault. It all rushed out, but somehow the boy in the brown pickup truck did not. It was almost as though that part of the story were snagged somewhere else in Anne's head. And there were too many other concerns just then to be bothered disentangling it.

"Oh, Mary Fran, I just wasn't paying attention," Anne said. "And I haven't even looked in the back. I hope the cake is all right."

Sure enough, the cake box had slid—clear to the back seat—but when they carried it inside and inspected it thoroughly, they could find no damage at all. Eddie's had done everything right—even the packaging. There on the kitchen counter was the beautiful sheet cake with its perfectly smooth white icing and tiny flowers surrounding Sister Regina's name. Then it was Mary Fran's turn to cry.

"Oh Lord," she said, wiping her eyes. "I've got the corned beef and the cabbage all ready, and you know she's not going to be able to get a bit of it down."

So to lighten things up a bit Anne said, "Wait 'til you hear this, Mary Fran, dear. Here's something that'll make you laugh. Do you know what that woman called me when we were standing out there in the middle of traffic?"

"No, what?" said Mary Fran, blowing her nose.

"She called me a stupid bitch."

"A stupid—Mother of God, Sister Anne, the nerve of her!" said Mary Fran, shocked at first, throwing her hand up to her mouth. But of course she was unable to contain herself—Sister Anne a bitch!—and they both had a good laugh.

Every one of the sisters, and anyone else who happened to hear the story that afternoon, seemed to say the same thing—there was absolutely no reason for Anne to worry herself about the little damage to the station wagon. We all make mistakes, they said, especially when we're busy and trying so hard.

Henry from maintenance had to tease her, of course.

"Is this your idea of a fender bender, Sister?" he said. "How fast

were you going—Ten? Fifteen? Let me get my glasses out now and take a look at this thing.”

But, peculiarly, it was not the encounter with the woman in the white convertible or the dent in the fender that haunted Anne. Rather it was the encounter with the boy in the pickup truck. All through the preparations for Sister Regina’s party, Anne had trouble pushing the thought of him aside. Surely, she told herself, as she arranged the party napkins on the table Henry had set up in the parlor, the boy would have discovered the error within a block of the wrong turn. He would have leaned out his window to ask for directions one more time, and learned that the Rotunda was a mere two blocks away.

She stepped back to look at the table—daffodils from the convent garden, the cut-glass dish of mints and chocolates, the good dessert dishes, a perfect fan of pastel party napkins, and in the center the beautiful cake.

Surely, she told herself, the error had caused him little trouble. Why then, for his sake, had she suddenly swerved off course and very nearly ruined all the good she had undertaken that day? For things might have turned out a lot worse. It wasn’t only the cake she was thinking of. She might have wrecked the station wagon. She might have really hurt someone.

She might have hurt herself. Who would drive the older sisters to the stores, and to the doctor and the dentist and the podiatrist? Someone else would, she thought, as tears came to her eyes, but there was no one in this world who knew as much as she did about tending to their little needs.

Just then Mary Fran came in from the kitchen.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” she said, slipping an arm around Anne’s shoulders. She had noticed the tears. “Why don’t you go upstairs and lie down for a while before dinner?”

But there was really no time to lie down, for at three o’clock the hospice nurse arrived to visit Sister Regina, and shortly thereafter the niece and her husband arrived from Philadelphia. Sister Regina was so surprised and happy to see them that two spots of color appeared in her cheeks and remained there nearly all the evening.

The rest of the day unfolded exactly as Anne had planned. First the dinner—Sister Regina even managed to eat a little corned beef—and then the celebration. Every single person they’d

invited was able to come to wish Sister Regina well, even a few of the doctors and nurses from the old days, all of them having the good sense to keep the visit short, and all of them receiving at the door, from Sister Anne herself, a little slice of cake, wrapped in a party napkin.

After the kitchen had been tidied up, and Mary Fran had gone home, and the other sisters had gone to bed, Anne went to check on Sister Regina. The door to her room stood open. In the light from the hall Anne studied the older woman's face, and the rise and fall of her breast beneath the covers. Sister Regina was resting comfortably, maybe even sleeping.

It was not until Anne lay down in bed that night, and all the excitement of the party rolled itself up and receded into the quiet, that the event of the morning returned to demand her full attention. She had known it would. She closed her eyes and resigned herself to face the boy in the pickup truck one more time. But what rose up to greet her in the dark was not the figure of the boy or his truck, but rather a figure of herself, standing at the curb in front of Eddie's Supermarket and looking pleased.

Anne opened her eyes. The branches outside her window swayed in the wind. She looked beyond them, imagining great clouds sweeping through the blackness above the convent and far beyond her view, great clouds full of angels, each one intent on the will of God. Suddenly, out of the blue, she thought of Lucifer, the most beautiful angel of all—and beloved too, before he sinned. How strange the mind is, she thought, strange to have come up with Lucifer. She could almost feel the power of his flight, the sureness of his every perfect move. There was an element of his pride she actually understood—not his refusal to serve, of course, but rather his delight in himself. She understood his dark swerving too, and the suddenness of his fall.

How strange, Anne thought, for she almost sympathized. She turned to face the wall then, intending to say a prayer, but already sleep was gathering her up, and the day was done.

ROBERT PHILLIPS

Letter to My Mother

You helped me pack for that milestone event, first time away from home alone. It didn't matter the summer camp was poor—long on Jesus, short on funds—bordering

a tea-colored lake. No matter we could afford only two weeks. To help get there I hoarded months of allowances. I was ten, felt grown, I finally was going somewhere on my own.

You folded the ironed tee shirts and skivvies—you even ironed and creased my dungarees. In Southern drawl: “And of course you'll dress for dinner!” you said, packing with the rest

my one blazer, dress shirts, and rep tie. I didn't protest, I was an innocent stander-by. (The suitcase was a new brown Samsonite. Even empty that thing never was light.)

First exhilarating day—after softball, archery, diving instruction (which I took to swimmingly)—came rest hour. While others took a shower or wrote postcards home, I dressed for dinner:

The white shirt, the pre-tied striped tie, the navy jacket. In process I received a wry glance from my counselor. The dinner bell tolled, I felt every bit the gentleman as I strolled

toward the rustic dining room. I entered,
 the room exploded with boyish hoots and laughter,
 pointing at me, the funniest thing they'd seen.
 They still had on their shorts or jeans.

The rest of the two weeks were impossible.
 Not chosen for any teams, called a fool,
 Mother, I was miserable through and through.
 But when I came home I never told you.

Trashed

A college picture of Father
 in V.P.I. dress uniform,
 looking like young Robert Taylor,
 sat on Ellie Barnette's dresser
 since freshman year when he came home.

He believed he truly loved her,
 sucked her lips, possessed her body.
 But next year he met our mother,
 quickly married by December.
 When the rivals met, Ellie's a lady,

proceeded to play godmother
 to successive offspring *en masse*.
 On birthdays she gave silver dollars.
 She died single, age fifty-four.
 Relatives put Dad's picture in her trash.

Found by a curious ragpicker
 who all but began to wave it,
 he returned it to our front door.
 Father claimed he was quite heartsore
 to learn how long Ellie'd saved it.

MARK VINZ

The Boy in the Woods

He lived behind us half a mile through trees
and wanted to be my friend—to teach me
how to recognize each kind of bark or leaf,
out stalking rabbits with bow and arrow.
Then he showed me his pellet gun,
the one time he took me back to his house,
run-down and gray among leafless branches.
The only color I remember was from
a pile of wings. I had to look them up
in my father's bird book at home—
oriole and tanager, bluejay, cardinal,
goldfinch, mourning dove—and then
I packed away my hunting gear for good.

After that, I saw him only once, at a game,
sitting by himself in a corner of the stands,
sighting an imaginary barrel at the players.
Someone said he quit school when he turned
sixteen—for years, each time I read the papers
I'd expect to see his name and once I even
hiked back to find that house again. It was
gone, and with it most of the woods, devoured
by subdivisions spreading from the highway.
But there will always be that last time,
the pile of wings he needed to show me—
his helpless smile and then his shrugging
shoulders as he turned and walked away.

JEROME MAZZARO

Duets

The screech of argument is done.
One wakes to the calm of absence.
No definitions, no defenses.
A bird is singing in a tree nearby.
The eye opens to day's glare.
After months of growing apart,
of finding our voices at odds—
accompaniment and lead off-key,
it feels good to sing a cappella,
to be like that morning bird
welcoming a new day,
knowing, too, that any two voices
are more in harmony
than one and silence.

PATRICIA HOOPER

Leda

When he came to me by the river
I turned away. In my fear,
my astonishment, I could not
see who he was, only
the white fire of his body, unlike
my body. What he wanted
was for me to desire
him. I looked at him only once:
in his suddenness, in
his beauty, a swan's beauty, he was not
the world's. But the world burned
with his brightness, all shuddering flame.

When he had gone
and I came back to my life,
I was still his. I was not
content like other women,
other mothers. In the fields,
at the well, I was always
dreaming of something else.
I looked for him everywhere,
and the world unfolded, unveiling
its presences, its enchantments. I still
feared him, but what I lived for
was the chance he would reappear.

And now, since I have waited
so long for his return, I see at last
the meaning of his absence, why
he shone and disappeared. My wonderment,
my hunger were his unintended
gifts. So I became

a vessel of attention: pure desire.
And now what I dread most
is that he might return in some
more common form and seek me out
and find me,
and in his coming take away all I have.

NEAL BOWERS

Less

She said, not that much,
so he spooned some back into the serving bowl,
but even then she ate less than half
and pushed what was left toward him
until the edges of their dishes clanked,
poured all but a sip of her wine into his glass
and waved off dessert, sighing
in a way that made the candles flutter
just before she snuffed them
and cleared away the few dishes, saying
it was the least she could do for such a meal,
and drove herself straight home, where she
didn't answer the telephone.

A Word with My Father

Cerulean is a word my father never knew.
He would have scoffed at it and said, "Say blue
if you mean blue." Well, I mean blue,
but I mean cerulean, too,
because it has the sky in it, shot through
with sunlight; and the sound of cerulean soothes
the way blue, however elongated, cannot do.
Even my father would say this is true,
were the rules of silence less strict at Riverview,
where the sky in November is a particular blue.

D. NURKSE

Rendezvous in Providence

Perhaps the gods are like us:
a couple breathless on a narrow bed.

They speak in low voices,
watching a fly cross the ceiling.

The self they lost comes back
on the breeze from a rickety fan.

A clock strikes. One touches
the other gently on the wrist.

As they undressed each other
now they dress themselves

in deep silence, and leave us
alone with this clock and mirror,

this love, this fear, these white hairs
tangled in a single comb.

JOHN LOUGHERY

Approaches to the Sacred

NOT FOR NOTHING DID WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS choose Byzantium as his metaphor for the magical and the faraway, an Empire—or state of mind—that for Westerners has always seemed more Asiatic than European (though not sufficiently Asiatic, like India or China, to be definably and securely a cultural “Other”). Not for nothing is John Julius Norwich’s trilogy, *The History of the Byzantine Empire*, as popular as it is—mercifully brought out by Knopf in a one-volume edition this year. The overlapping identities are almost too potent: the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox, the Mediterranean and the Slavic (with a strong Arabic influence), the comprehensibly secular and the spiritually overwrought, the worldly and the mystical—all keep the word “Byzantine” alive with multiple meanings. Stories in Norwich like the quick, calculated rise of Basil I from Armenian stablehand to co-Emperor (given a more explicitly sexual aspect in John Boswell’s controversial *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*) rival anything in Suetonius.

“The Glory of Byzantium,” a spring exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dealt with the middle Byzantine period, its second “golden age” stretching from the end in 843 of the “iconoclastic controversy” to the occupation of Constantinople by the Crusaders in the 1200s. Both parts of the frame situated us, by modern Western notions, in a dramatic, even fantastic realm. The dispute over the proper attitudes toward icons was no small scholastic debate. The veneration of religious images as holy objects in and of themselves was a fiercely contested issue that split the kingdom. The Christian Crusaders’ sacking of a major Christian city on their way to reclaim the Holy Land from the infidel Moslems was no less incredible an event. In between these epochal developments, the civilization known as “New Rome” rivaled the artistic richness of the Greco-Roman world, though its processional crosses, chalices, liturgical manuscripts, minutely carved icons of wood and ivory, tempera paintings, stone carvings, mosaics, and frescoes served a less warlike or libidinous God. Perhaps the best feature of the curators’ selections (a remarkable number of which have never before traveled or, in some cases, left the monasteries where they have been housed for the last 1,000 years) was in their swift undoing of so many Western stereotypes. Personality as much as stateliness turns out to be central to the Byzantine depiction of the apostles and martyrs, even the Holy Family. The sacred was meant to be otherworldly, mysterious, larger than life, but not entirely unconnected to human ideas about

warmth, character, drama, and nuance. In *Icon with the Enthroned Virgin Surrounded by Prophets and Saints* (c. 1080), a particularly splendid tempera on wood from the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine in Egypt, a fidgeting Christ Child sits in the lap of a very busy mother. The twelve scenes surrounding the central image make for a precise, formal arrangement, but not one that really keeps the viewer at bay. An early thirteenth-century tempera of Saint Panteleemon is notable for a realistic, expressive face, and a Moses from the same period is drawn as a startled young man before the burning bush, not the standardized eminence of Western European art. The thirty monks on a tilting ladder pointed heavenward, in a rich tempera with gold on wood in the same gallery, are elements in a manic allegory, as black demons from below await the first missed rung on the treacherous climb. These artworks are “a focus of contemplation which provided the faithful with a sort of window on the divine world,” as Karen Armstrong observed in *A History of God*, but they are not part of the Islamic effort to establish the divine presence as unseen and unseeable.

Of course, not all of the 350 objects in this exhibition were inspired by religious devotion, and several galleries were filled simply with magnificent bracelets and pendants, fluted cups, and elaborate incense burners. Practicing “the politics of bedazzlement,” as one curator phrased it, Byzantium’s ties to neighboring Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Syria, Cyprus, and Bulgaria were both generous and strategic, enabling it to forge a truly multicultural empire of fluctuating borders. Yet another interesting dimension of the show alluded to Byzantine influences on the early Italian Renaissance. Berlinghero’s *Madonna and Child* (c. 1230), a tempera on wood with gold ground, is a good example in the long, emaciated fingers and quizzical expression of the Virgin. The Byzantine desire to keep alive a certain quirkiness in religious art, to merge pomp and dignity with subtle emotion, is a lesson the Renaissance Popes would have done well to learn.

In that sense, engrossing as it was, the Met’s Byzantium exhibition—much like last year’s huge survey of African sculpture at the Guggenheim or the “Primitivism” show at MoMA in the early eighties—reiterated the limitations of the modern aesthetics-first approach to pre-twentieth-century culture. There is something odd, even unintentionally distancing (if inevitable), about our “take” on the past in this regard. Removed from their original settings and brought to Fifth Avenue, these treasures can say only so much to us, no matter how earnestly the acousti-guides discuss their original spiritual import. A half-dozen visits to the show and an examination of the 600-page catalogue don’t even begin to bridge the gap between what such mosaics, ivories, and manuscripts mean to us as well-wrought objects and what they meant to believers in the day of their creation. “The past is a foreign country,” novelist L.P. Hartley wrote in *The Go-Between*. If that is true of our own past, how much more true is it of a time and a part of

the world where words like “Christianity,” “faith,” and “art” evoke something so different from what they do today in the West.

Two winter exhibitions—Tiepolo at the Met and Hogarth at the British Art Center at Yale—were, in a way, amplifications of this theme of the growing Western discomfort with a too-intense or demanding spirituality and the increasing prominence of the individual, a philosophy that still separates us from other cultures more than we admit. For Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770) may have created innumerable religious paintings, but they all work to redo religion as grand opera, while for his British contemporary, William Hogarth (1697–1774), the profane completely eclipses the sacred, and the theater, not the church, speaks more directly to the people.

The first wall plaque at the Tiepolo show told us, in no uncertain terms, that in approaching Tiepolo in the 1990s “we must leave behind conventional assumptions about artistic expression and our arbitrary categories of decorative and serious.” Revisionism is afoot, in other words. To be sure, it makes perfect sense to acknowledge that frivolity, wit, and playful color are *not* at odds with the deepest forms of greatness. Who was more whimsical and light of touch than, say, Florine Stettheimer? And I think it likely that before long she will occupy as important a place in American art chronicles as Georgia O’Keeffe or any of the “weighty” Precisionists like Charles Demuth or Charles Sheeler. (I’m with those who would make Stettheimer a cause.) Yet the attempt to invest Tiepolo with more gravity than he has been accorded over the last century is doomed to failure. Even taking into account that the major frescoes are only to be seen on site in Venice, and even giving this particular show high marks for its clarity and presentation, the artist is still going to strike most contemporary viewers as a sumptuous shell with a hollow core, more like the exquisite jewelry in “The Glory of Byzantium” than the revered icons. In a more modern light, virtuoso painterly skill itself almost (but not quite) equals any lost higher intentions, anyway. There is no need to make of Tiepolo something deeper or more complex when he does what he does so well.

It is also frankly hard to believe that these paintings were movingly religious in their own time: the sacred has become theatrical, and flesh and fabric are too important. Tiepolo’s babies are the pinkest, fleshiest creatures, and the Christ Child in *The Madonna of the Rosary* (1735) has the fattest boy calves ever seen in human anatomy. The El Greco face and the red and gold chasuble of Saint Philip Neri in *The Vision of Saint Philip Neri* (1740) arrest us more than the transcendent vision itself, and so on and on it goes. Whether it is Saint Lucy taking her Last Communion or Saint Francis receiving the stigmata or the martyrdom of Saint Agatha, her severed breasts on a plate beside her, the workmanship and the aura are no different from that of the secular Tasso Cycle, the marvelous series of wall-size illustrations of a Renaissance chivalric poem which are included in the Met’s exhibition. Why is the effect so different for the Venetians themselves? Byzantine art even at its most sensuous is about

the irrelevance of the human ego, the greater wonders to come; Tiepolo is about the triumph of the human ego, a reveling in craft that is anything but sacerdotal or anonymous, and a celebration of worldliness. Vivaldi, not Bach. A masque, not a Mass. *Putti*, the fold of a gown, a particular shade of orange-yellow, the mother of Christ: in the final analysis, they're all equal in Tiepolo, all happily sharing center stage.

Ego in need of puncturing was William Hogarth's *raison d'être*, and a love of the theatrical was something he was only too ready to own up to. In a small exhibition of the kind the British Art Center at Yale University does so well, "Among the Whores and Thieves: William Hogarth and *The Beggar's Opera*" took as its focus the controversy stirred by John Gay's "opera of the people," Hogarth's defense of Gay's new street-life aesthetic, and a whole snobbish set of values that defined High Culture as Italian and native British art as small potatoes. The Hogarth of *Self-Portrait with Palette* (1735–1740) that opened the show was the right man to come to his friend's aid; despite the powdered wig and the afterthought of a palette, this is a picture of someone not apt to be taken in by pieties and shibboleths. Two of Hogarth's five versions of a climactic scene from Gay's work were on view (the authorship of a third is uncertain), alive with robust and appreciative detail, while his etching *Masquerades and Operas* (1723) takes aim at the wider problem: a society that worships false gods and neglects its own virtues. An *au courant* mob packs a building on one side of a London street to see the latest Italian opera, as a woman on the other is forced to sell copies of Congreve, Dryden, Jonson, and Shakespeare as "waste paper for shops."

The Yale exhibition also included some of William Blake's copies of Hogarth, Jonathan Swift's tart *Intelligencer* essay defending Gay's play against charges of immorality, and a wickedly funny anonymous engraving entitled *Idol-Worship, Or the Way to Preferment* (1740), in which would-be officeholders or businessmen in need of favors must pass through an archway formed by the Clintonesque buttocks of Horace Walpole: kiss it or don't get in. To the charge "Is nothing sacred?" the best minds of Hogarth's time would have answered, "Precious little that we're aware of."

From Tiepolo and Hogarth to Marcel Duchamp is a stretch, but there was no time like last winter to decide, finally, what to make of Dadaism and the ever-expanding influence of the creator of *Nude Descending a Staircase* and that fountain of controversy, the urinal *R. Mutt*. The first museum exhibition devoted to the subject in my time and the publication of Calvin Tompkins' biography of Duchamp provided the opportunity and the needed material. "Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York" at the Whitney Museum of American Art was an historical as well as an art exhibition, and so the fascinating timeline (1913–1924) on one wall, the vitrines of photographs and letters and avant-garde journals, the screening of the Paul Strand/Charles Sheeler short silent film "Manhata," and especially the recreation of the famed Arensberg

apartment at 33 West 67th Street—the epicenter of Dadaism in America—were as important to the show as the art objects themselves.

“Objects themselves”: that phrase would seem to be at the heart of the peculiarly European phenomenon of Dadaism in its time and the very different thing it was in America and is taken to be today. Because a good part of Dada, as conceived by the poet Tristan Tzara and adopted—and adapted—by Duchamp had to do with a wish to destroy the icons of bourgeois culture, to release modern creativity from “the Big ‘A,’” as Marsden Hartley put it. The Big “A”—Art—was suffocating, trite, bourgeois, and passé. Ypres and Verdun had rendered a number of things passé, including good will between the generations and respect for the institutions of authority, be they legislatures, churches, universities, or museums. Old ladies cooing over objects on a wall, and the old men who paid for them, were the enemy now. Reasonableness was a trap, and beauty a middle-class illusion. The readymade (a urinal is a work of art because I, an artist, say it is) and the spontaneous poem were, then, factors in a liberation movement, a line of thought that led in a roundabout way to the Beats, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, conceptual and performance art. Yet time is another factor in this story, an historicizing element that neuters all revolutions, and American-ness itself is another. The snow shovel on the wall at the Whitney might have looked sadly quaint eighty years after its first I-dare-you-to-say-something appearance, but there were in this thorough exhibition a great number of genuine artworks. Of objects. Of fascinating, well-made, *beautiful* objects. They tended to be by the Americans who welcomed Duchamp to these shores and loved the healthy infusion of camp and mockery he brought with him, but never quite cottoned to the idea of jettisoning the whole shebang.

As such, we get drollery rather than bitterness in Charles Demuth’s *Business* (1922) or Charles Sheeler’s *Skyscrapers* (1922). There is technique with oils to drive a connoisseur mad in Florine Stettin’s *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (1923) or *New York Liberty* (1918). John Covert’s *Brassband* (1918), with its encrusted lines of twine, is as much about the intricacies of “making” as it is about anti-bourgeois subject matter. Worshipful delicacy characterizes Morton Schamberg’s pastels of machine parts, and Arthur Dove’s collage *The Critic* (1925) is warm, endearing, classically American satire. The opinion was voiced early on by Man Ray that the principal city of the United States was not going to be the most fertile soil for Dada (“All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival, will not notice dada”), and there was something to that: brute modernity and anti-reason were already in the air. But, as “Making Mischief” suggested, there was room for one anti-artist and his snow shovels and a host of artists of more object-oriented, if rebellious, tendencies. That they left behind a body of work of museum stature is (thank goodness) nobody’s fault but their own.

(Something of the true legacy of Dada in its original, more indignant spirit followed at the Whitney in the form of the 1997 Biennial, about

which there was little to say other than that it was no more tedious than the last few. The issue isn't merely that Lisa Phillips is a profoundly unoriginal curator, but that the artists themselves form such a herd at a well-gone-dry, as all wells must: sarcasm, irony, and anger are tools-of-the-trade now, while multimedia environments can be as monotonous and fetishistic as oil-on-canvas was to the young Duchamp. I overheard one artist telling an interviewer at the press preview, "Oh, I don't believe in that suffering artist myth." Not exactly a novel thought this late in the day, but the need to be rebellious—even when the standards of the art world provide nothing to rebel against—dies hard.)

"Max Beckmann in Exile" at the Guggenheim's SoHo branch last winter was a one-stop exhibition of twenty-one paintings that suggested an approach different from the Dadaists' to the betrayal, brutality, and loss that characterized life in modern Europe for an anti-war, anti-nationalist, anti-Fascist individual. Paradoxically—given the horrific nature of Beckmann's images—his was an approach that also implied a less absolute despair. Human relations, notions of progress, the moral order, and the body politic may all have gone to hell, and the artist's evocation of anxiety and anomie is almost unparalleled in modern culture, but paintings they are nonetheless—works of art—that attempt emotional, psychological, and aesthetic connections with those who stand in front of them. In that sense, Beckmann had more in common with Kafka, for instance, than the truly anti-art crowd like Tristan Tzara or Marcel Duchamp.

Despite the title, not all of the paintings in this excellent show were made after Beckmann (1884–1950) fled Nazi Germany for Amsterdam and, ultimately, New York and St. Louis. But that's to the good: we were able to see some works, including MoMA's triptych *Departure* (1932), *The King* (1933), and *Self-Portrait in Tails* (1937) that explored the subjects of brutality, dominance, and a troubled individuality well before the bombing and the burning started. Perhaps that point touches on one of the qualities most appealing in Beckmann—a unity of vision. There never was a cozy period of lost innocence. The man who saw the Côte D'Azur, in *Dream of Monte Carlo* (1940), as a stage where the palm fronds and croupier's sticks are interchangeable with swords, had a keen, long-trained eye for human vanity and pretense. Nor did that spirit diminish with the end of the war. In *Blind Man's Buff*, a triptych owned by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts which was painted at the time of the Allied liberation of Europe and the fall of the Reich, any hint of consolation or relief is firmly put in its place. Candles illuminate nothing; whispered messages are lost in the din; musical instruments are grasped, rather than played, and don't appear to serve a purpose. In Beckmann's art, recovery and redemption are concepts for the naive or the willfully deluded. Even the artist's frequent use of triptychs (e.g., *Actors*, *Carnival*, *The Argonauts*, *Beginning*) plays on this sentiment, making use of a medieval religious form in an age that mimics medieval

slaughter but dispenses with God, judgment, righteousness, and accountability.

The men and women whose drawings and paintings originated in the horror of twentieth-century German history followed diverse paths, from the more mainstream (so to call it) emotion and technique of Käthe Kollwitz to the unrelenting weirdness of Otto Dix. Only Max Beckmann, though, managed a fully developed style that also evoked the *unreality* of a world that was still recognizable—yet no longer made sense, a world offering vestiges of meaning, but growing more brutish and impenetrable by the minute. Not even the ghastly yellow walls the Guggenheim's galleries were painted for this exhibition could diminish the impact of a flawless match of subject and style—the chapped, patched, sometimes rust-tinted brushwork; the lumpish but never static figures; a claustrophobic space that nonetheless holds, and even imprisons, the eye; myriad colors and blends of color that give these surfaces energy without sensuality and a fascination bordering on repulsion. T.S. Eliot spoke on behalf of a distance between the mind that suffers and the hand that creates. In Beckmann, the individual agony, the collective agony, and the pictorial poem seem nakedly one. The Guggenheim show admirably and tersely captured that achievement.

At the Tibor di Nagy Gallery in midtown, the first New York show of Philadelphia painter Stuart Shils was probably the most memorable gallery exhibition I saw last winter. Shils goes at his small canvases—or, rather, the primed paper he prefers—with an expertly controlled aggressiveness. Trees or fields barely hold onto their earthy qualities as fluid brushstrokes try to claim, or devour, them for their own purposes; blocky masses of paint suddenly declare themselves as rooftops or the walls of buildings. And all this is done on a scale (in the vicinity of ten inches by ten inches) that demands the closest inspection. The short catalogue essay invoked Corot at least four times, not to mention Constable, Kline, and Joan Mitchell, which was a little highfalutin in this context. The pleasures of the paintings had less to do with big-name antecedents than with a truculent approach to the current scene, aligned neither with realism (too much lustrous paint-as-paint here) nor abstraction (too many discernible objects even amid the heavy impasto). Neither purely a landscape artist—too many city vistas—nor a latter-day Ashcan painter (the man is especially in love with green of every hue), Shils adopts an agreeably cocky stance to the art politics of the day, taking from—yet tweaking—all the other camps.

RICHARD HORNBY

California Theatre: Four New Plays and a Revival

NEW YORK HAS BECOME A TRYOUT TOWN. David Henry Hwang's new play, *Golden Child*, ran for a few weeks downtown at the Public Theatre last fall. Based on that experience, the author reworked the piece for its world premiere in January at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California. Nevertheless, it will probably make its way back to New York, in a Broadway theatre, because it is a very good play. Although it lacks the outrageous quality of Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, which had a Westerner discovering that his Asian "mistress" was actually a man, *Golden Child* has vivid characters, a good story with lively conflicts, and, as with the former play, an eye for significant cultural clashes between East and West.

Golden Child begins with a contemporary Chinese-American couple (probably based on Hwang himself, and his wife) who are expecting their first child. The husband, who has just turned thirty, and who is somewhat awed by the responsibilities of fatherhood, contemplates his Chinese heritage for the first time. In a dream, his dead grandmother appears to him, telling the story of how his Chinese great-grandfather, her father, converted to Christianity seventy years ago.

The merchant Eng Tieng-Bin lives in a village in China in a household with his three wives and two young children, one of whom is Eng Ahn, the grandmother/narrator from the framing play. (Ahn is called "golden child" because she once brought her father luck in gambling, the great Chinese vice.) The family, dominated by the matriarchal first wife, is hidebound; although the father deals in international business, and admires Sun-Yat Sen, the reforms of the Nationalist government seem not to have reached this village, where ancestor worship, polygamy, and foot-binding of women are still standard practice.

Eng's three wives are distinctly different: First Wife (Eng refers to them by number!), Ahn's mother, is old, savvy, and domineering. Her bark is worse than her bite, however; she ultimately backs off in confrontations, while her secret opium addiction is a weakness that Second Wife discovers and exploits. Second Wife is saucy and manipulative, and ultimately the toughest of the three. Third Wife is young, naive, and sexy.

At the time of the play (1918–19), Eng sleeps only with Third Wife. ("That is what young wives are for," explains First Wife to Second Wife, "to save us all that mess and bother.") First Wife, to whom he was

betrothed as a child, now seems like a mother to him. He married Second Wife for business reasons; although they have an unseen son, Eng is indifferent to her. Only Third Wife, whom he chose for himself, is someone he truly cares for.

Humility is the name of the game in the family politics of this household. The women outdo one another in declaring their worthlessness, and their utter devotion to their mutual husband, while actually manipulating him and running the place as they please. Eng decides, in a fit of modernization, that Ahn's foot-bindings will be removed, so that her feet will develop normally. First Wife's reactions are hilarious as she of course wants instantly to accede to his every wish, but what about tradition, and the anger of his dead ancestors, and doesn't he know that removing the bindings at this point will be very painful?

In the end, First Wife has to give in. This is only the beginning of the wave of change sweeping over the family. Eng invites a Christian missionary for tea. Playwright Hwang's brilliant, hilarious stroke is to have the American, Reverend Baines, speak broken English as a convention, standing for his bad Chinese. ("Wife very beautiful. Yummy!") Miscommunication carries over into his religious preaching, as the family respond to Christianity entirely for secular reasons. While Western males might be titillated by the idea of polygamy, Eng finds it tedious, and is actually excited about having to have only one wife! Second Wife plays up to the missionary, going through the motions of conversion in hopes of becoming that sole wife.

First Wife resists the new religion as she does all things modern or Western, as a threat to her position and power, but after the family conversion, she dies of an opium overdose. The beloved Third Wife also dies, in childbirth, though the baby survives. As a result of his misfortunes, Eng renounces Christianity; God took the wife he loved, and the wife he respected, leaving him with only the wife for whom he feels nothing. "You get to spend your life with one woman," he moans, "but the catch is, it's the wrong one!"

James Lapine directed *Golden Child* deftly for the mainstage theatre at South Coast, one of the best regional theatres in the country. Tony Straiges's scenic design on the large stage had three small curtained houses (one for each wife) in Chinese style as a household compound, backed by a traditional Chinese painting. The entire setting was fronted at the beginning by another loose white curtain, so that curtains became the visual metaphor for the three wives, all of whom have double personalities, their private selves very different from the ones they present in public. Martin Pakledinaz's gorgeous Chinese costumes complemented the setting to create a visually splendid production.

Stan Egi seemed a bit young for the role of husband Eng, but his performance was nonetheless poised and true, while John Christopher Jones was perfect as a bland, cheery, muscular-Christian missionary. Ultimately, however, the play belongs to its females, and the actresses playing the three wives—1) Tsai Chin, 2) Jodi Long, and 3) Liana

Pai—gave distinctive, varied, pungent performances. Julyana Soelistyo, a wonderful, charming actress about four-and-a-half-feet tall, played the title role both as a child and as a grandmother in an absolutely credible, compelling manner. I doubt if the role was originally conceived for a single performer, but Soelistyo, I became convinced, could play anything.

The Pasadena Playhouse is one of the oldest and loveliest theatres in the country. The current building, now landmarked, dates from the 1920s, when the Playhouse was noted for premieres of new works, including one by O'Neill, and for revivals of seldom-produced classics; it also began a school for actors that trained many important American stars. Nowadays, the theatre itself is still beautiful (you can see it in the movie *Noises Off*), but its offerings run to standard works, recent New York hits, and occasional new plays of little merit.

Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting deals with Branch Rickey's decision, in 1947, to hire Jackie Robinson for the Brooklyn Dodgers as the first black major-leaguer. Playwright Ed Schmidt puts Rickey and Robinson in a fictitious meeting in a New York hotel room with Joe Louis, Paul Robeson, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson; the idea is to get these black leaders to endorse the move, or at least not protest it.

The 1950s movie *The Jackie Robinson Story*, starring Robinson himself, focuses on the agreement that Robinson will turn the other cheek on the ballfield, not arguing or fighting back no matter what kind of racial abuse he suffers. Although the film is rather naive and obvious, this central problem is inherently dramatic, so that the film works. Schmidt's play in the beginning touches on the same pact, but then forgets about it, wandering off in several directions. Jackie suffers from constipation, leading to tedious toilet humor. Each of the three black leaders has an objective, which is not so much developed as reiterated: Joe Louis is eager to leave, Bojangles is eager to please, while Robeson, the early black militant, wants to squelch the deal, proposing that a black all-star team instead play against the white major league teams. He is concerned about the probable ruin of the Negro League, an important part of black culture. Had the playwright any feel for black life in those days, he might have developed this concern into something interesting; even today, there are militants who bemoan the end of segregation. Instead, the idea goes nowhere; Robeson's proposal is so ridiculous that no one else in the play even takes it seriously.

Instead of conflict, there is endless, repetitive exposition. (Even one of the characters eventually complains, "I've been sitting here all afternoon listening to this!") At one point, trying to hype the action, the playwright has Bojangles get angry about something—I forget what—and pull a gun! This too is so silly, so out of character, that it leads to nothing.

Robert Walden, awkwardly made up and padded to look old and fat, was wildly miscast in the title role, but the black actors in the cast were uniformly good, especially Sterling R. Macer, Jr., who was youthful,

athletic, and energetic as Jackie. Gary Wissmann's set and Christina Haatainen's costumes had the 1940s flavor that was so lacking in the writing. Sheldon Epps's direction was vague and busy. All in all, Jackie Robinson, born and raised in Pasadena, deserves a better play than this, as do the patrons of the Pasadena Playhouse, now in its eightieth, and perhaps weakest, season.

The title of Tom Strelch's new play, *BAFO*, stands for "best and final offer," which I guess is a standard phrase in negotiations in the aerospace industry. My best and final offer regarding this play is: Forget it. Like Ed Schmidt, Strelch is another young playwright who seems to think that if you put a bunch of characters in a room and have them spout lengthy exposition VERY LOUDLY AND PASSIONATELY, it constitutes a play. It does not, even if the exposition is better motivated and more gracefully written than Strelch's. South Coast Repertory presented the world premiere of his *BAFO* on their second stage, running simultaneously with their mainstage production of *Golden Child*. The contrast in playwriting ability could not have been more extreme.

The play is set in "the conference room in the offices of a small defense contractor in the declining Southern California Defense/Aerospace industry." For the first half-hour, four middle-aged men bemoan their forthcoming layoffs from their high-paying jobs. An officious young woman comes in to call one of them to a meeting where he will be given the heave-ho. Gunshots are heard in the distance. Instantly, the woman infers that it is an AK-47, and that they must be under attack by a crazed gunman. (Her perspicacity is supposed to be funny.) The gunman, a disgruntled, laid-off employee, shows up armed to the teeth, but turns out to be an even bigger windbag than his former colleagues. For nearly an hour, he terrorizes them, and bores us, with a vaguely New-Age philosophy, until the others overpower and kill him. Brandishing his weapons, the men rush out of the building exultantly, only to be shot down by a SWAT team, who of course assume that the men are the terrorists. The woman, uncontaminated by testosterone, is level-headed enough to stay behind, so that, alone on stage, she can philosophize for us still further.

Mr. Rickey in Pasadena at least had a largely skillful cast. *BAFO* had a cast of old South Coast hands who were merely shrill and tense. Richard Doyle was the worst of the lot, winning a ten for mugging and a zero for acting. Martin Benson directed the whole mess, while John Iacovelli, my colleague at the University of California, Riverside, designed a surprisingly good set that captured the sterile, inhuman feel of corporate America. Perhaps he can use it again, in a better play!

For twenty years, the George Coates Performance Works in San Francisco has been producing live multimedia performances that use technology as an artistic instrument. Coates works with both computer scientists and avant-garde performing artists, with some amazing results; for example, one production had some cast members playing roles on-line from another continent. Since 1990, the GCPW has had its own

resident theatre in a reclaimed neo-Gothic cathedral with sixty-foot vaulted ceilings, located in a 1929 high-rise in San Francisco's Civic Center, yielding an odd but potent juxtaposition of traditional and ultramodern.

Last winter, Coates wrote and directed a production called *20/20 Blake*, celebrating the poetry and visual art of William Blake. The renovated Civic Center theatre now has a standard proscenium configuration; on a gauze screen hung in front of the sloping stage, but behind a broad forestage, Coates projected three-dimensional images, adapted from Blake's watercolors and engravings, that served as settings. We in the audience had to wear 3-D polarized eyeglasses, the first time I have seen them since my moviegoing days of the 1950s. (The audience wearing the glasses beneath the Gothic vaults, pillars, and carvings looked like members of some oddball California religious cult.) The effect was sensational. Whether in front of or behind the screen, the actors seemed to be surrounded by three-dimensional settings, which could even loom out over the audience. The apparently solid, massive sets could change instantly, from a grotto to a mountain to the front of a temple. What was most intriguing was the way in which the scale of the actors seemed to change in the process; in one moment, an actor would be dwarfed by a gigantic Blakean angel, in the next become a colossus himself, striding a mountain.

Unfortunately, the performance itself was not up to its technological level. There were seventeen scenes, each focusing on a Blake poem, sung to music composed mostly by Adlai Alexander. There was also some fragmentary dialogue, spoken by Blake himself, his wife, a few metaphysical folk, and the potter Josiah Wedgwood, who was characterized as an early-nineteenth-century philistine, interested only in the commercial aspects of Blake's art. ("But first, may I ask do you have a smaller size? Just a little bit off the top.") Wedgwood, I suppose, was meant to contrast with Blake the visionary artist, but Blake's own lines were so magniloquent ("My fingers emit sparks of fire with expectation of my future labors") as to make him seem merely a blowhard. It did not help that Robert G. Kennedy, playing Blake, hollered his dialogue and poetry monotonously, with a noticeable Brooklyn accent. (The real Blake, I need hardly point out, was a Londoner.)

The other performers were equally inept as actors, though most sang well. Alexander's music had the big, operatic emptiness of an Andrew Lloyd Webber piece, which reinforced the impression of a megalomaniacal Blake. Setting "To see a world in a grain of sand" to such loud, slow, pretentious music, for example, went dead against the meaning of the poem, which is about the universal nature of *simple* things. In general, the naive side of Blake's writings was mishandled or left out, as were Blake's social protests. (Poems like "The Chimney Sweeper" or "The Little Black Boy" were not included.)

Musical accompaniment for the show was by a live rock group headed by Alexander himself on electrical guitar. Coel Winn's costumes were as

heavy-handed as the music, consisting of early-nineteenth-century costumes on the humans and bulky tunics on the celestial figures, both often in a silver fabric that looked leaden, confining, and ugly. In sum, George Coates's productions are definitely worth seeing for their technical ingenuity, but if he wants to raise them from the current Disneyland level to that of art, there must be more attention paid to substance instead of just to technique.

The Pacific Resident Theatre Ensemble is a surprisingly good company operating two tiny, drab theatres on sun-bleached Venice Boulevard in Venice, California. Last winter they performed Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in their smaller theatre, which seats only 35, so intimate that it was like watching the play in your living room—though I hope your living room is a lot less shabby.

Shabbiness was only the beginning of the production's problems. Stanislavski once pointed out that when something goes wrong onstage, it can actually bring a scene to life. The actors, forced to confront something new and real, start reacting and inventing instead of merely repeating what they have done a hundred times before. This production seemed out to test the theory with a vengeance: On the afternoon I saw it, a chair broke under the weight of an actor; the stage lights conked out, so that the entire first act had to be performed under a single, dim fluorescent bulb; a hanging lamp was smashed to bits; a cigarette lighter went off like a flare, yet still failed to light the cigarette. And the performances were wonderful!

One of Shaw's early "unpleasant" plays, *Mrs. Warren*, written in the 1890s, lacks the famous Shavian wit of Shaw's later work, but it is a strong social problem play with particularly striking characters. Its young heroine is Vivie Warren, a "new woman" who smokes cigars and drinks whiskey, has just taken a mathematics degree from Cambridge, and is about to study law. She is courted by an amiable young fellow named Frank Gardner, who wants to marry her for her money but who loves her nonetheless. Vivie has never known much about her family, nor where her money came from. The possibility of the impending marriage catalyzes a series of revelations: Vivie, despite her comfortable and respectable upbringing, is illegitimate; her mother, Mrs. Kitty Warren, is a former prostitute; all of Mrs. Warren's and Vivie's income came from Mrs. Warren's "profession" of prostitution.

Vivie finds the revelations about the illegitimacy and prostitution shocking, but, "new woman" that she is, becomes reconciled to them; her mother, after all, had a hard early life. But when Vivie realizes that Mrs. Warren is still in her profession, a vast, enormously lucrative, international prostitution racket overseen by Mrs. Warren and a cynical, rascally friend named Crofts (who at one point pursues Vivie), she renounces her mother, and Frank too, since he is penniless and cannot afford to marry Vivie without her money. The thrust of the play is thus strongly didactic, but, as with Ibsen's social plays, the social protest is never mere sermonizing. Vivie's idealism is counterpointed by her

iconoclasm; she may reach a conventional decision, but she does so by unconventional means. Her mother is not a stereotyped prostitute with heart of gold, nor an equally stereotyped whore with heart of steel, but rather a practical woman with a good business sense. Crofts is a scoundrel, but, like his successor Andrew Undershaft in Shaw's *Major Barbara*, he has a shrewd realism about life as it is actually lived that often makes him sound refreshing.

Nancy Linehan Charles was a powerful Mrs. Warren. As with the rest of the cast, her English accent (or, in her case, accents, since the character slips back from upper-class to cockney from time to time) was not particularly accurate, but she made up for it with great force and emotional range, giving the character a swagger and self-confidence that seemed all the more telling in the confining period costumes. Most of the social protest material in the play comes from Mrs. Warren's mouth; the lines in the great revelation scene about Mrs. Warren's "respectable" sister, who went to work in a white lead factory, where she "only expected to get her hands a little paralyzed; but she died," combine all the anguish and indignation and sense of helplessness that characterized the great social protest movements of the late Victorian era. The actress made the tiny but responsive audience gasp at the horror; at the same time, she showed vulnerability too, in the love for her daughter whom she is losing.

The rest of the cast was surprisingly strong for a group operating under primitive theatrical conditions. Beth Colt, tall, cold, and commanding as Vivie, was a perfect foil for Nancy Charles; there even seemed to be a family resemblance here between mother and daughter. Jay Bell brought considerable charm to the underwritten role of Praed, an artist friend of Mrs. Warren. But casting William Dennis Hunt as Crofts may have been the most perfect marriage of actor and role in theatre history. A Dickensian figure with a face like that of a large frog, Hunt was a smooth villain, relaxed, self-righteous, with great stage presence and panache.

Charles Linehan's settings for *Mrs. Warren* would have looked cheap even at your local high school, while Marty Carrillo's lighting (when it was working!) had neither realism nor atmosphere, but Audrey Eisner's costumes were varied, detailed, historically accurate, and always expressive of character. Director Michael Rothhaar staged the play valiantly on the minuscule stage, but his greatest achievement was in assembling such a fine cast.

BERT CARDULLO

Wooden Allen, or Artificial Exteriors

I AM FREQUENTLY ASKED WHY I DON'T WRITE about the films of Woody Allen. Here's my answer.

Woody Allen used to be a funny guy. Then he became a serious artist, or thought he did at any rate. His first screen "drama," *Interiors* (1978), was an embarrassing episode in Allen's career, to be followed by such others as *September* (1987), *Another Woman* (1988), and *Alice* (1990). *Interiors* represented a feeble struggle to escape from his more authentic self, an incredible concession to the snobbish misgiving that comedy is an inferior art—something which doubtless would be news to figures as diverse as Aristophanes and Molière, Charlie Chaplin and Billy Wilder. Prior to this film, Allen had exercised a welcome talent for parody and a shrewd recognition of the clichés by which many American urbanites live, even though he never allowed his comedic talent to develop much beyond the gag-and-skit stage of *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex . . . But Were Afraid to Ask* (1972), *Sleeper* (1973), and *Love and Death* (1975). These films, of course, take their genesis from his comic writing for television in the 1950s.

As a *showman*, Allen certainly has developed a professional eye when choosing a cinematographer, a lively ear for the musical score, and a refined taste in actresses (such as Barbara Hershey). Not in actors, however: witness his casting of himself in the leading roles of his comic and semi-comic movies, which a better actor (such as Dustin Hoffman) would make even wittier, along with his exclusion of himself from his utterly serious films, where he could perhaps do some humorous good! As for the oft-made remark about what a competent *director* Allen has become, all that I can say is, with his bankroll and artistic support-system, I too could become a competent director after so many pictures. To echo André Bazin on *auteurs*, competent director, yes, but *of what?*

He certainly didn't help his cause with such a narcissistic meditation on the filmmaking experience as *Stardust Memories* (1980), a rip-off of Fellini's *8½*, even as the comic fantasy of the vastly overrated *Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) is lifted in reverse form from Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* And to say that he has resolved his artistic dilemma or division by striking a balance between the solemn and the funny in movies like *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), even *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Husbands and Wives* (1992), is to miss the extent to which such pictures fail as genuine tragicomedy.

Rather than combining the serious and the comic into a unique new form, they just irresolutely lay the two elements side by side, or overemphasize one at the expense of the other, against the backdrop of culturally rich, culturally hip, psychically neurotic New York, which these films expect to do the real work of “meaning” for them. In movies like these, Allen is continually sending love letters to himself and to that province of provinces, Manhattan, and I for one don’t enjoy reading other people’s mail. A woman once told me that I should see *Hannah and Her Sisters* with someone I love. I don’t know what she could have meant by this exhortation, given the film’s solipsism, and I’m glad I didn’t see it with her!

But, some people will say, those artsy Europeans, especially the French, love Woody Allen. Yes, well, they loved Samuel Fuller and Don Siegel not so long ago, and look where that got us. Europeans think that Americans (read: New Yorkers) are fabulously nutty at the same time that they believe America (read: New York) is wonderfully glamorous. That’s why they love Woody Allen, Manhattan diarist. New Yorkers and all who aspire to be New Yorkers like *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (among other Woody vehicles) because these films congratulate them on their choice of city in which to live, and because these people think that Allen is the cinema’s answer to drama’s Chekhov: serious, comic, and deliciously melancholy, all wrapped up in the same tidy little package.

One, just one, difference between Allen and Chekhov (it’s difficult to write their names in the same sentence) is that the latter had some distance on himself and life, to put it mildly. Irony played a large part in his art, as did his knowledge of the theatrical tradition that had immediately preceded him. Allen loves himself and New York so much, he’s nostalgic about both before the fact, to the point of making it and his own person the real subject of his films. And the very first time he thought about tradition, he tried to imitate Ingmar Bergman, the result being the disastrous *Interiors*, whose genesis and execution I would now like to consider at length. For this picture reveals not only a comedian’s betrayal of his comic self, but also a filmmaker’s mistaken assumption that one can create great art by consciously setting out to do so, according to this or that recipe, instead of intuitively using artistic means to capture for all eternity an image or idea of humanity.

According to the biography of Allen by Lee Guthrie (which, significantly, was withdrawn from distribution shortly after the opening of *Interiors*), the comedian once admitted that although he admired the films of Bergman, they could only be a bad influence on his work, “because they’re so antithetical to comedy.” He went on to explain that Bergman interested him more than any other filmmaker, owing to “the consummate marriage of technique, theatricality, and themes that are both personally important to me and have gigantic size—death, the meaning of life, the question of religious faith.” In other words, Allen was impressed by the austerity of Bergman’s style and by what he reads

as the master's tragic view of life. So impressed that, in a later declaration, he was prepared to throw previous caution to the wind and reach for just those "gigantic" themes, which he was now translating as "more personal" than those of his contemporaries. From the same source, we get the following statement: "I'm not sure any American filmmaker makes the kind of movie I want to make. I don't want to do films like *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Mean Streets* or *Badlands* . . . To me, serious American films always have one foot in entertainment—and I like more personal drama, though there may not be a market for it. The drama I like is what you see in the plays of O'Neill and Strindberg . . .—and in foreign films."

God forbid that a "serious" movie should have one foot in the swamp of entertainment! And as if *Annie Hall* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, to name only two of Allen's seriocomic films, don't try to entertain at the same time as they confront—however lamely or indecisively—significant themes. But there you have it: the puritanical hunger for the High Serious, the discontent with authentic veins of American subject matter. Such native material may not be shot through with the subtle values of living to be found in European movies—you know, all that wisdom, refinement, and *tendresse*—but it is nonetheless vital in its consideration of the harsh characteristics of so much of American life: baseness, greed, and brutality.

Incidentally, this coupling of O'Neill and Strindberg on the part of Allen is meaningful. Strindberg was the artistic stepfather of Eugene O'Neill, who successfully transplanted the Swede's suffocating ethos into American settings, and who for his part managed to write only one comedy (*Ah, Wilderness!*) among his many works for the theatre. The Swedes flattered O'Neill and his solemn sensibility back by staging all his plays at Stockholm's Dramaten in addition to awarding him the Nobel Prize in 1932. Strindberg is also, of course, the single most influential figure behind all Bergman's work, although the filmmaker seems to substitute excessive love for women for the dramatist's extreme antipathy toward them. Both of them, however, share an aversion to comedy, though Bergman did master it for once in *Smiles of a Summer Night*—a movie more or less remade by a spent Woody Allen in 1982 as *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*.

The sympathetic link between these Swedes and the Americans is the fundamental puritanism they culturally share. It has been said that the smothering family atmosphere in certain Bergman films, even as in Strindberg's naturalistic *The Father* and O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, appealed to Allen by reason of his special Jewish vulnerability to comparably oppressive parents in his own environment. I would not wish to pronounce on this probability, if probability it is, but I suspect that the driving force behind Allen's wistful Bergman-worship is rather an aspiring intellectual's love of conceptual perfection and a confusion of it with the Less-Is-More aesthetic of Scandinavian reductionism,

together with an obsessive love for women that Allen confuses with a desperate need to validate his narcissistic love for himself.

Be that as it may, the truth is that it takes more independent imagination, greater cinematic scope, and a richer sense of life's poetry to make *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Mean Streets*, or *Badlands*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Wild Bunch*, or *Chinatown*, *Raging Bull*, *House of Games*, or *Tender Mercies*, than it does to make *Interiors*. Unlike a host of American movies in which the citizenry's blindest self-satisfactions with the status quo are upheld, or in which the most immoral and fantastic projections of callow romanticism, spurious religiosity, or miserable sentimentality are indulged, these films insist on writing down contemporary American society as they see it: a society alarmingly animated by powerful minority factions that are debased and selfish when they are not downright criminal; that is grotesquely peopled by a fringe of parasites surrendered to listless perversions or violent exploitations, or alternatively populated by a growing number of decent yet subsocial creatures who lead unexamined if not unworthy lives; and a society that is forever encumbered by a floating majority, pitifully bewildered, vulgarized, and juvenile, which is sadomasochistic at its core, hence wanting in all resolution, guidance, and dignity except perhaps in time of war. If this is not the whole truth about the American experience, it is that part of the truth most commonly suppressed for public consumption.

What, by contrast, is Woody Allen's *Interiors* centrally about? Certainly not "the meaning of life"—a silly predication for a work of art, in any case. And though the rejected wife and mother in the film kills herself, *Interiors* is in no awesome way about death. The people involved are not tragic, although some of them would like to be; they tend instead to be hysterical, obtuse, or pathetically abusive. Their behavior more closely resembles that of the pseudo-intellectual New Yorkers of Paul Mazursky's films, who simultaneously know too much about one another and bitch all the time at their own limitations. Is this quality what makes the movie, for Allen, "more personal"? Is this the quality that he admires in *Scenes from a Mall*, Mazursky's absurd take, starring Allen himself, on Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*?

Interiors should have been the tragedy (or even the comedy) of a man's attempt, alternately assisted or opposed by his three daughters, to win his own soul by ridding himself of their mother, his wife. I say "should have been" because Allen's conception of that man is so feeble (in the Bergman tradition of the ineffectual male), and the performance of E. G. Marshall is so uninflected, that he emerges as a far less sympathetic character than the compulsively meticulous wife played with twitchy naturalism by Geraldine Page. Arthur, as he's called, persists in his bid for freedom—he wants to go to the Mediterranean, presumably to be reborn—against the warnings of his plaintive wife, who threatens suicide before actually attempting it, and against the querulous protests of his daughter Joey, more closely identified with her mother than her sisters are, probably because her own identity is

insecure (as yours might be, too, if you were burdened with a name normally reserved for the opposite sex). The father-husband returns from Greece uttering the same banalities as before—nothing about him has changed, not even his ties—together with a personable if clownish woman whom Joey indignantly and correctly describes as vulgar. When Arthur marries the creature, mother, sure enough, walks into the sea. Loyal Joey is all but drowned in a vain attempt to save her, and she in turn is resuscitated by the unrefined stepmother: which proves that this name-flashing tourist may be an ox in the drawing room, but when it comes to fundamentals she is the pragmatist who saves the day.

Implicitly, Eve the mother deserves her fate, for in the explanation given her (too late) by Joey, she felt herself too good for this world and so created another, of interiors—of décor and decorum—which had demanded, from those around her, responses too strict for any of them to meet. Yet it is difficult to imagine that everyone around Eve is as derailed as they all seem to be by an excess of good taste; the calamities represented, in other words, are in excess of the cause alleged. (No one suggests, incidentally, that an exquisitely dictatorial mother might have been the answer to a visibly bland father.) The articulated miseries of the daughters and their men are strenuously reached for, hence appear contrived. They are phony excavations of the interior—of interior life—whereas Allen's specialty has always been the humorously objective observation of exteriors, the coolly comic send-up of surfaces. Diane Keaton plays intelligently an unintelligent poet whose self-contempt is fairly inexplicable, since her ignorance should be her bliss. Similarly, her husband, a churlish literary genius who's fearful that he is not as good as the critics say, decides to assert his misgivings by trying to rape his sister-in-law, a television actress given to drug addiction.

The whole embroilment is distorted by Allen's insistence on telling his story in a style alien to the milieu he provides, a style that transposes the tenor of an American metropolitan setting into the hushed and claustrophobic atmosphere of Bergman's *Baltic*. He opens *Interiors* with unornamented credits, no simultaneous visuals behind them, no music. The exposition features single-shot close-ups of two sisters, each looking out a different window, followed by a medium shot of a male who, gazing at an urban panorama, commences a narration to himself and to the audience—a familiar Bergman beginning. Allen's man has his back to the camera, perhaps to alleviate the shock of our eventual recognition that he is none other than the tepid Marshall, informing us, in an unlikely outburst of rhetoric, that suddenly in the course of his contented marriage he “found an enormous abyss opening at [his] feet.” Too much of the dialogue thereafter is like this, the sort of talk which, in earlier Woody Allen movies, would have speedily led to a verbal pratfall, but which here only makes for tragicomedy of the unintentional kind.

Allen tries hard—perhaps too hard—to keep his settings from becoming as cluttered or static as his language, staging crucial scenes at the

dining table and in the bedroom, then in an empty church and at a beach house in an attempt to exile the everyday domestic world. Self-consciously he employs a camera at rest, passively framing close-ups of faces or middle-distance shots of a stationary group, except for moments when he is recalling other Bergman strategies. The most conspicuous of these is the tracking shot of two sisters conversing as they walk along the beach, which sentimentiously evokes the world of *Persona*. With every sequence Allen thus appears to have asked himself, not "How can I best shoot this?" but "How would Bergman shoot it?" Moreover, he ends his film with a strict reversion to the Bergman format that, at the same time, summons a whole repertory of understated curtain tableaux from post-Ibsenian drama. After church and the business with the white roses and the coffin, the three sisters are aligned in profile (a reminder of the opening shots, as well as of Chekhov's greatest play), staring at the sea. One says, "The water is calm," and another solemnly replies, "Yes, it's very peaceful." That Allen should have been trapped by so obvious an error as to believe that you can depict tragedy by imitating the surface of it from someone else's version—this, I must say, is truly amazing. But perhaps no more amazing than his belief that you can create tragicomedy or tragifarce by spicing up a vaguely serious story with Woodycisms and casting a ridiculous man (himself) in the role of the leaden leading character.

The director-screenwriter has said that such recent films of his as *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993) and *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995)—a parody of the original murder mystery, *Oedipus the King*—mark a return to his "earlier, funnier," purely comic and less derivative brand of filmmaking, to which I can only respond, "Too little, too late." So desperate is he to return to previous form or prior success that his latest work, *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), nearly abandons reality altogether for the childish world of musical comedy, a world toward which Allen's Gershwin-and-Porter-driven soundtracks have been moving for some time. Except that "real" New York, in the form of carefully selected views of Manhattan's loveliness, is still on hand in this movie to be adored and to provide the action with a backdrop—ironically, the best word to describe the direction Woody Allen's career has taken since he went "deep" nearly twenty years ago and made the fateful *Interiors*.

I happen to be happy that Woody Allen plays the clarinet and has played professionally at Michael's Pub in New York. I wish he'd stick to clarinet.

BRUCE BAWER

In Our Beginnings

AS WE APPROACH AN IMPORTANT ENDING—that of the second millennium A.D.—many people appear to be increasingly drawn to questions about beginnings. This may be one reason why the Book of Genesis is big business these days. Another reason, unquestionably, is a New York rabbi named Burton Visotzky, who in the early 1980s organized a group called the “Genesis seminar”—a shifting cast of intellectuals, writers, and scholars who met regularly for roundtable discussions of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, and Joseph and his brothers. Among those who found their way to Visotzky’s table—which was located in a basement room of the Jewish Theological Seminary—was the journalist Bill Moyers, whose fascination with the enterprise led to last winter’s public-TV series “Genesis: A Living Conversation.” On Moyers’ rotating panels of eight, which borrow Visotzky’s format, were a range of theologians and clerics (including Visotzky), and a surprising number of novelists, including Bharati Mukherjee, Oscar Hijuelos, and Charles Johnson. All were plainly chosen with an eye to religious, gender, racial, and ethnic balance; the inclusion of so many novelists reflected Moyers’ interest in Genesis not only as holy writ—a window on the nature of humankind’s relationship to God—but as a collection of stories about universal human themes.

Those who missed the series may still catch it between hard covers: the companion book, also entitled *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, brings together transcripts of all ten episodes.¹ Generally speaking, in fact, the book proves a better way than the TV show to experience the conversations: it allows one to move quickly through the less compelling parts and pause over the more thought-provoking; it also liberates the text from the personal quirks and mannerisms of the participants, some of whom can be pompous, bombastic, and self-dramatizing. At its richest and most rewarding, the book shows these men and women reflectively turning over the Genesis stories to articulate and examine critically the image of God presented in them, and to explore, in turn, the tensions that are thereby uncovered among their own differing visions of God and of the scripture’s *dramatis personae*. Is God a God of perfect love or can God be hardhearted and destructive? Is Noah to be admired (as Genesis suggests) for the “righteousness” that made God single him out for salvation and that impelled him to raise an altar after the Flood, or

¹ GENESIS: A Living Conversation, by Bill Moyers. Doubleday. \$29.95.

should we revile him for failing to warn his neighbors about the coming deluge and for projecting his anger at God afterwards onto the Canaanites? What is righteousness? What is the proper stance toward a God who, in these pages, is frankly murderous?

The participants often allude to their own backgrounds in the course of explaining their various conceptions of God and of their own obligations as believers; they tell stories about their own faith development, their experiences in Sunday school and in war, as theology professors and members of victim groups. We are reminded again and again that Genesis relegates women to silent, marginal roles; the participants fruitfully discuss the effect of this on the book's portrait of God, who in Genesis, more than anywhere else in the Bible, does indeed seem a male figure—and a *human* figure, given to favoritism, jealousy, rage, and inordinate acts of violence and destruction. The participants differ in their views of scripture: some plainly regard Genesis as a document of inherent and unquestioned authority whose apparent messages, when offensive, must somehow be made acceptable to modern readers by means of fancy interpretive footwork; others recognize Genesis as a product of a primitive culture whose more odious notions should not be allowed to shackle modern minds and hearts.

The less interesting participants in Moyers' book tend to be the novelists, whose observations about dramatic structure and character motivation are often banal and immaterial; sometimes these writers seem determined, moreover, to shove God as far as possible upstage. Enter David Rosenberg, who brings together twenty novelists, poets, playwrights, and essayists in *Genesis As It Is Written: Contemporary Writers on Our First Stories*, a book that views Genesis less as scripture than as short-story collection.² Alongside the conversations in Moyers' book, Rosenberg's book seems thin, diffuse; indeed, it appears to have no clear reason for existing. Though writers like Alfred Corn and Phillip Lopate make strong showings, others seem to be flailing around for something to say. Phony-sounding hyperbole abounds (Grace Schulman: "The poet's artistry is staggering"; Arthur Miller: "It is an amazing piece of prose"), as does personal memoir (for Ron Hansen, Cain and Abel spark memories of his own sibling rivalry). Ultimately, the book (whose characteristic tone is struck by sentences beginning "As a writer . . ." and "For me personally . . .") comes off as an affirmation of the contemporary creative-writing-program notion of a writer as a mysteriously privileged being who captures universal truths by incessantly looking inward. Which, alas, too frequently reduces Genesis to an occasion for narcissistic reflection.

"Be fruitful and multiply," God says in Genesis, and *Genesis: A Living Conversation* has done just that. In addition to the companion book and Rosenberg's collection, it has spawned a slim paperback tie-in entitled

² GENESIS AS IT IS WRITTEN: Contemporary Writers on Our First Stories, ed. and intro. by David Rosenberg. HarperCollins. \$20.00.

Talking about Genesis: A Resource Guide, which explains how viewers can organize their own “Genesis groups” and provides questions for study and other resources.³ (According to Moyers, countless such discussion groups have sprung up in houses of worship around the country.) Several of the show’s panelists, moreover, have put out their own Genesis books. Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Berkeley, and Stephen Mitchell, a translator with a background in Zen meditation, have both published new translations of Genesis; Karen Armstrong, a former nun and author of *A History of God*, and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, a lecturer in Bible and Midrash in Jerusalem, have both issued Genesis commentaries. There would seem to be something gender-appropriate about all this: while the two men audaciously reject earlier translations and take possession of the text, ordaining certitudes and brazenly presenting a would-be-definitive God who speaks in their own voices, the two women delicately and tentatively probe the text, dwelling on its nuances and embracing its ambiguities.

The translations by Alter (who may be known to many readers mainly for his articles on the Hebrew Bible for the conservative Jewish magazine *Commentary*), and by Mitchell, a liberal ecumenist with a Buddhist bent, are striking in their differences.⁴ Alter values Genesis largely because of what it has meant to Jewish culture and Western civilization; Mitchell is more interested in it as a repository of wisdom that can be relevant to today’s readers. Saying that “words such as *God* and *Tao* and *Buddha-nature* only point to the reality that is the source and essence of all things, the luminous intelligence that shines from the depths of the human heart,” Mitchell takes a much freer approach to Genesis than Alter does, to the extent even of shifting to an appendix some materials that he considers inferior, gratuitous, or redundant.

Indeed, the two translators take entirely contradictory views of the Genesis text, which scholars have demonstrated was based on three original documents, known as J, E, and P, that were brought together by a compiler known as R. Mitchell avers that “Genesis as it is presented to us in R’s recension—as we read it in the Hebrew text and in all the translations, except for a few scholarly ones—is a disservice to the original authors”; thus he has “separated the text into its sources, printing each story as a distinct work by a particular writer.” Alter, for his part, strongly defends the idea of Genesis as a single unified text, stressing scholarly disagreements over the dating and authorship of J, E, and P, and claiming that the scholars’ work on these sources “has begun to look as though it has reached a point of diminishing returns.” “The informing assumption of my translation and commentary,” declares Alter, “is that the edited version of Genesis—the so-called redacted

³ TALKING ABOUT GENESIS: A Resource Guide, intro. by *Bill Moyers*. Doubleday. \$5.95p.

⁴ GENESIS: Translation and Commentary, by *Robert Alter*. W.W. Norton & Co. \$25.00.
GENESIS: A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories, by *Stephen Mitchell*. Harper-Collins. \$20.00.

text—which has come down to us . . . has powerful coherence as a literary work, and that this coherence is above all what we need to address as readers.” Yes, he admits, Genesis is full of ambiguity, contradiction, and repetition, but much of this is “purposeful” and essential to the “literary experience” of a book that has “the cohesiveness, the continuity of theme and motif, and the sense of completion of an archetectonically conceived book.” Thus Alter “refers only occasionally and obliquely to the source analysis of Genesis. For even where such analysis may be convincing, it seems to me a good deal less interesting than the subtle workings of the literary whole represented by the redacted text.”

You couldn’t get much further apart than Mitchell and Alter. Who’s correct? For this non-scholar, the answer often seemed to be: whomever I’m reading at the time. Both make their cases persuasively; one has the impression that to an extent it’s a *Rashomon* thing, ultimately too subjective to allow for definitive pronouncement. Yet ultimately style wins the day. Alter’s manner is stuffy, academic, pretentious—and awkward. He says that he has sought to produce a translation that “has stylistic and rhythmic integrity as literary English.” Yet the first sentence of his translation doesn’t even seem to have been written by a native speaker: “When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said, ‘Let there be light.’” Compare Mitchell’s for diction, syntax, rhythm: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was chaos, and there was darkness over the abyss, and the spirit of God hovered upon the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

I do not know Hebrew, but I know English, and the English of Mitchell’s translation is quite simply more graceful and natural than Alter’s. Sentence by sentence, this contrast holds throughout the two translations. Alter translates Genesis 6:4 in this way: “The Nephilim were then on the earth, and afterward as well, the sons of God having come to bed with the daughters of man who bore them children: they are the heroes of yore, the men of renown.” Here’s Mitchell: “It was in those days that the giants appeared on the earth: when the gods slept with the women, and children were born to them. These were the heroes who lived long ago, the men of great fame.” Why does Alter use the word *yore*? His explanation: “The Hebrew style of this entire clause reflects a certain epic heightening, hence the archaizing turn in the translation. One suspects that these words are either a citation of an old heroic poem or a stylistic allusion to the epic genre.” Yet *yore* only evokes images from medieval romance—knights, damsels, suits of armor. It seems ironic that Alter, who claims that Genesis is a unified literary whole, has written a translation that is a mishmash of stylistic jabs and feints of this sort, while Mitchell, who emphasizes the variations in style among the original documents, brings considerable stylistic unity to the book. Though Alter’s translation choices invariably make logical sense, in

short, they aren't always aesthetically defensible; if Alter is first of all a scholar, Mitchell is first of all a poet. Reading Alter's translation can be instructive; reading Mitchell's brings literary pleasure.

Zornberg writes in the introduction to *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* that her book "explores problems, relationships, patterns" in the text of Genesis "without arriving at single-minded or schematic theories."⁵ "I am looking to loosen the fixities, the ossifications of preconceived readings," states Zornberg, who views Genesis as being largely about discourse itself, about how "the need to translate, to seek meaning through . . . human discourse, remains the endless project of human life." In the course of her line-by-line, scene-by-scene meditation, she rarely steps very far back from the narrative, content to apply her bountiful intellect and learning to the particulars of the material, making ample references to highfalutin scholars and thinkers (a typical page cites Nietzsche, Schiller, and Trilling) and keeping her hands deep in the text, like a heart surgeon performing a marathon operation. Armstrong, by contrast, is something of a general practitioner; in *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* she has written a highly accessible book that routinely moves from the specifics of Genesis to general observations about God, scripture, and faith, many of which challenge fundamentalist conceptions.⁶ "Today," she observes, "many religious people who embark on the religious quest are searching for a message or for privileged information that will ensure their survival in the hereafter. Others believe that religion's chief function is to provide the faithful with moral guidance. But in almost all cultures, people originally turned to religion because they wanted to live as intensely and efficaciously as possible." In a world of chaos, "religion helped them to overcome the limitations that flesh is heir to, to experience life fully, and to put themselves in touch with the deeper currents of existence that alone could give meaning and value to the whole."

Armstrong makes some arresting observations. She points out, for example, that the snake's seduction of Eve in Eden, which Saint Augustine identified as the source of humankind's "original sin," is not viewed in this way elsewhere in the Bible or in Jewish tradition. But the most memorable portions of her book are those in which she reflects on the meaning of Genesis's savagely realistic portrait of human existence. "We should not construct a theology that is so facile," she argues, "that it enables us to blunt our sense of life's horror and cruelty; rather we should admit that, like Jacob, we have to wrestle painfully in the dark before we can discern the divine in such circumstances." For her, indeed, the ultimate point of Genesis is that human beings "would be able to sense life's sacred dimension when they displayed practical

⁵ THE BEGINNING OF DESIRE: Reflections on Genesis, by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. Image Books/Doubleday. \$15.95p.

⁶ IN THE BEGINNING: A New Interpretation of Genesis, by Karen Armstrong. Alfred A. Knopf. \$20.00.

compassion . . . and when they wrestled manfully with the turbulent, conflicted world of the psyche.” Strikingly, Armstrong maintains that we must “accept evil in the divine,” contending that the only alternative is the simplistic fundamentalist view in which God and His saints are entirely virtuous and other people are entirely evil. God, she suggests, “should not be experienced as a wholly ethereal panacea but as a mysterious, accompanying presence that helps us to make sense of the bewildering circumstances of our life on earth.”

If all these books on Genesis have anything in common, it is that they resist the fundamentalist conceit that the Bible is a literally true, perfectly consistent, and utterly error-free historical account that points to some firm, unequivocal set of theological propositions. “It is impossible,” asserts Armstrong, “to come away from the Book of Genesis with a coherent notion of God. . . . The editors seem to be warning us against any simplistic conception of the divine, which must always elude our limited comprehension.” In other words, “there is no final certainty.” But of course this message will always be resisted by those for whom religion is about embracing an illusion of ultimate certitude and resisting all doubts and questions as the promptings of Satan. Those of us who find it easy to forget that millions of Americans still read scripture in this manner may find a salutary reminder in John Sailhamer’s *Genesis Unbound: A Provocative New Look at the Creation Account*, which attempts to modify the fundamentalists’ so-called “creationism” into something Sailhamer calls “Historical Creationism.”⁷ Sailhamer, who is firmly anti-evolution and insists that Genesis 1 must be read as an historical account in which the seven days of creation are seven actual twenty-four-hour days, seeks to enable readers to continue to call themselves literalists while accepting at least some scientific facts that have generally been seen as contradicting a literal reading of Genesis. To turn from the other Genesis studies—which so rewardingly contemplate the nature and meaning of human life and spirituality—to Sailhamer, who labors mightily to make biblical literalism cohere with modern science, is to be struck anew by the shallowness, puerility, and pathos of fundamentalism and, in fact, to recognize that fundamentalist habits of mind are inimical to genuine spiritual experience. Let us hope for a new millennium in which religious communities turn to the likes of Mitchell and Armstrong as spiritual teachers and in which books like Sailhamer’s are nothing more than historical curiosities.

⁷ GENESIS UNBOUND: A Provocative New Look at the Creation Account, by Dr. John Sailhamer. Multnomah Books. \$12.99p.

JOHN HAINES

Poetry Chronicle

THERE IS A SOUND, A TONE, OR A PULSE, if we can put it that way, which in any period underlies the more obvious music of verse, and that is the sound of the larger world around us—of forces veering and connecting, the flaring of wars and passions, the untimely dissolution of societies, collision and breakage—all of which constitute the world in which we must construct our lives and shape our thought. To the extent that the language and its structures reflects these forces, it serves us with a certain truth.

In reading Wallace Stevens, especially late Stevens, one finds a mastery that is not simply a mastery of form and technique, though that is there also, but a mastery of another sort, that of one's time, of the hour in which one lives and works. I am speaking of that which animates the work of a certain period—call it Geist, spirit, or something else, it is what makes the difference. One can be schooled to recognize it, but it cannot be faked or invented. It is present or it is not, and its appearance cannot be predicted.

The foregoing thoughts have been much in my mind while considering the books under review here. Henry Taylor's new collection, *Understanding Fiction*,¹ is a case in point. The titles and subjects of the poems tell us a great deal: "After a Movie," "Night Search for a Lost Dog," "Elevator Music," and "Free Throw." There is a poem about a child's popped balloon; another about a horseshoe game; a brief memorial poem for the poet William Stafford; another for E. A. Robinson. "Flying Over Peoria," a poem I liked as well as anything in the book, opens with these lines:

The man beside me nudges my arm
and shrugs toward the window.
"Peoria," he says. I glance across him
at clouds and vague patches of earth.
"Where many things won't play,"
I say, trying to smile.

The poem continues with a brief account of an episode in the man's life, and ends with these vaguely consoling lines:

¹ UNDERSTANDING FICTION: Poems, 1986-1996, by Henry Taylor. Louisiana State University Press. \$16.95.

A man weeps
privately, another ponders
odd uses of a word like *concept*,
and below them the featureless landscape
keeps slipping farther away.

The poem is affecting in a quiet way: a momentary encounter with another human being that might happen to any one of us in the odd, often dislocated travel of our time. The poems otherwise are ably written in a variety of metrical forms, dominated by domesticity and locality—the poems of a country gentleman, in fact. A compelling book, on the whole, it is not. And then, in a short middle section with the heading, “Five Translations,” I come on a poem by the Bulgarian poet Kyril Kadaski, and from which I quote the last stanza.

Like beads of sweated blood, stars wink and fail;
the poplar holds a vinegar moon on high.
An aerial thrusts its arms into the sky—
a cross to which the living world is nailed.
“Good Friday”

In what I take to be an accurate translation, we are for the moment in another world altogether. Though no specific place is named, in the starkness of that final image the note is unmistakable, and it is our modern world, become increasingly universal in its menace and encroaching violence. It is a note not to be found elsewhere in this book.

Among the books considered for this review I have been pleasantly impressed by David Wagoner’s *Walt Whitman Bathing*.² If I did not know that Wagoner is writing from the Pacific Northwest, I would discover in his poems, and notwithstanding the titles and subject matter of many of them, a tone and sensibility that is clearly not Eastern or Midwestern, but centered on the western rim of the continent, in a wet and rainy land. The poems are otherwise varied, the attention shifting from one scene to another. There is a poem about his father “. . . Laughing in the Chicago Theater”; another about his school days; another about some trouble with his eyesight. There is humor, as well, in a poem about a meeting between Aldous Huxley and Thomas Mann on a beach in California, and what they inadvertently find there. One of my favorites, “Walking Around the Block With a Three-Year-Old,” is a delightful poem about the poet’s young daughter, what they find on their walk, and the interrupted conversation between them.

² WALT WHITMAN BATHING, by *David Wagoner*. University of Illinois Press. \$11.95p.

She sees a starling legs-up in the gutter.
 She finds an earthworm limp and pale in a puddle.
 "What's wrong with them?" she says. I tell her they're dead.

On their way home they find that the starling has disappeared.
 "Where did it go? / She says. . . . I show her my empty hands, and she takes one."

The title poem is also moving in a quiet way, being a description of Whitman in his late, disabled years, bathing alone in a pond near his home. Throughout the book are poems on specific places. "On the Forest Floor," in the final section of the book, is one of the more rewarding poems I have read recently, marked by an observant intelligence and a sober grace in expression. The last stanza is as follows:

The closer you look at it, the more it changes
 To the landscape of the earth.
 The yet-to-be and the dead and the newly risen
 Merged into rootless lives whose entrances,
 Like your lost eyes, become what enters them,
 Where all that endures is your bewilderment.

One might say of such woodland poems that they are the work of someone for whom that world is a place to visit as part of a weekend venture, and return from to a safe harbor. For this reason, perhaps, Nature, as felt and witnessed here, has a somewhat distant aspect. Yet the felicity with which Wagoner writes may have its permanent attraction. The poems justify themselves on their own merits, and the best of them have a genuine, true attention to the world around them; the poems of someone who has looked intensely at the shrubs, the flowers, and at the forest floor from which they have sprung.

Anthony Hecht's *Flight Among the Tombs*³ has received high praise from a number of reviewers. It is in many respects an impressive work, and I have found it entertaining in the best sense of the word. The poems in the major portion of the book, composed in various voices and figures of Death, and illustrated with wood engravings by Leonard Baskin, are particularly compelling. Whether the work places Hecht among the great writers of our time, as proposed in the jacket comment by Harold Bloom, is another matter and not to be decided here.

Titles to some of the poems will give an idea of the direction of the writing: "Death the Oxford Don," "Death the Painter," "Death the Inquisitor," etc. "Death the Judge," in these concluding lines

³ FLIGHT AMONG THE TOMBS, by Anthony Hecht. Alfred A. Knopf. \$23.00.

... has composed
His predetermined sentence,

And in his chambers sits
Below a funeral wreath
And grimaces and spits
And grins and picks his teeth.

If at times the work leaves the impression of Death on a holiday—rather like a Day at the Races, or a Night at the Opera—still, the underlying sinister tone and the many vivid personifications of Death, are often arresting. It is a tribute to Mr. Hecht's mastery of formal verse that poems like these, in other hands perhaps all too occasional, succeed here in being far more than that. His traditional training and exercise stand the poet in good stead. Even when one has for the moment little of overwhelming importance to say, the presence of the craft and discipline in itself may rescue the writing from inconsequence.

This artistry is not without defect. In the second part of the book a memorial poem for James Merrill is moving in its evocation of that admired figure. Another for Joseph Brodsky, though it displays an obvious affection for the man and writer, is more problematic. Whatever else that poet may have been, he was not "American" in any deeply valid sense.

One or two of the poems in this section seem at times excessively artful or merely decorative. A few lines from "La-Bas: A Trance" may illustrate this:

Harems of young, voluptuous, sloe-eyed

Houris, undressed, awaiting his commands,
Untiring courtyard fountains casting jewels
Thriftlessly into blue-and-white-tiled pools,
Their splashes mingled with languid sarabands.

A high-class art, if you will, not entirely free of excess.

In Donald Justice's *New and Selected Poems*⁴ we have the example of an unfailing mastery of verse. Many of the poems are by now well known and to be found in influential anthologies. An early poem, "Here in Katmandu," can serve as a more than adequate example, with its opening and concluding stanzas:

We have climbed the mountain.
There's nothing more to do.
It's terrible to come down
To the valley
Where, amidst many flowers,

⁴ NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, by Donald Justice. Alfred A. Knopf. \$25.00.

One thinks of snow,

 Meanwhile it is not easy here in Katmandu,
 Especially when to the valley
 The wind that means snow
 Elsewhere, but here means flowers,
 Comes down,
 As soon it must, from the mountain.

Among other poems from an early period, "On the Death of Friends in Childhood" continues to echo in its concluding grace and regret: "Come, memory, let us seek them there in the shadows."

Yet, and while acknowledging the very genuine accomplishment to be found here, and for which we are to be grateful, something is missing, and that something is a necessary tension between the poet and society, in this instance a situation resolved perhaps a little too comfortably. A more recent poem, "Pantoum of the Great Depression," may serve as a useful illustration. Here is a representative stanza:

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
 And time went on, drawn by slow horses.
 Somewhere beyond our windows shone the world.
 The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

Here, in the exercise of a particular, complicated verse-form, the very skill involved in its practice may tend to diminish the potential subject. In this poem there is no real poverty, but rather distance and nostalgia. And it may be that the true subject of our time will require another approach, another sort of mastery.

Finally, as seems reasonable when reviewing the better part of a lifetime effort, to what extent can one describe a creative growth in these poems? An early mastery, yes, but beyond that? I am not certain we find here that slow maturing of outlook that in Stevens, for example, found expression in so late a poem as his elegy for George Santayana, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," a poem that in its gravity and resonance seems to sum up an entire epoch. But such things are rare at any time, and in considering Donald Justice we must be grateful for the outstanding work we find here.

Concerning two other books I will be brief if not merciful. C. K. Williams' *The Vigil*⁵ reveals, mainly, a good deal of inflated writing. An introductory poem, "The Neighbor," sounds a typical and repetitive note:

⁵ THE VIGIL, by C.K. Williams. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$18.00.

Her five horrid, deformed little dogs, who incessantly
 yap under my window;
 her cats, god knows how many, who must piss on her rugs—
 her landing's a sickening reek . . .

It would be easy to skim through this book and make a catalogue of the ludicrous and outrageous, the absence of a worthwhile theme, the need to force, to invent subjects and occasions in order to justify another book and further a career. The final impression is that Williams has for the most part no true subject, and must rely on the sprawl of his lines to compensate.

Beds squalling, squealing, muffled in hush; beds pitching,
 leaping, immobile as mountains;
 beds wide as a prairie, strait as a gate, as narrow as the
 plank of a ship to be walked.

*I squalled, I squealed, I swooped and pitched; I covered
 my eyes and fell from the plank.*

"The Bed"

The italics only serve to emphasize the theatrical nature of the writing. "In Darkness" is a more promising poem that revisits Harlan County, Kentucky and the condition of its coal miners earlier in this century. Yet even here the potential in the subject is dissipated in Williams' apparent need to inflate both occasion and language: "as now, they, the political thugs, crazed with power, waiting to wreak social mayhem . . ." Were there space in this review, it would be instructive to compare the poem with Malcolm Cowley's sober account of being there at that decisive moment in the early 1930s⁶: the utter conviction with which Cowley and his fellow writers confronted the enormity of the social abuse, and the tepid sympathy invoked by Williams in his verses.

The one thing that at times redeems the writing is the onrush of the verse lines that would carry all before them, good and bad, trivial and genuine. I come away with the impression of a poet who simply hurls himself into the writing of a poem, come what will. I can be persuaded to admire this, up to a point; but the volume of fluff and buffoonery can be more than a little discouraging. Despite the sprawl of his lines on the page, inviting comparison, Williams is no Whitman; he has no expansive nation or suffering people to fuel his sensibilities and his verses, only his own kitchen and bedroom.

Dave Smith's *Floating on Solitude*,⁷ a gathering from three previous volumes, announces itself with this comment from Helen Vendler:

⁶ See "Radical Images," in *The Portable Malcolm Cowley* (New York, 1990), pp. 82, 84.

⁷ *FLOATING ON SOLITUDE: Three Volumes of Poetry*, by Dave Smith. University of Illinois Press. \$16.95p.

"I scarcely know where to begin in describing Smith's rich writing . . . his poems make other poems seem loose, unfinished." We are then invited to savor poems that begin with lines like these:

The sun frets, a fat wafer fallen like a trap of failed
mesh.

"Hole, Where Once We in Passion Swam"

It squats in a grandmotherly yard,
surrounded by the breaking teeth
of a fence . . .

"Chinaberry Tree"

Your fat wife weeps through her yellow shawl.
By bricks furred with soot your ragged cat laps from
a bottle . . .

"Undertaker, Please Go Slow"

With lines like these, with entire poems fashioned of similar material, who needs vaudeville? There may be better things in Smith's over-weighted 320-page collection, but you will look hard to find them. If you wish briefly to be entertained by some obviously comic language, by a variety of self-parody, or by a mock-country usage, then Smith is your man.

Am I at home here, humpback snub,
nub of nothing, rock where pines
preen on wimpling winds,
roots with capillaries bulged,
sucking seamist to live? I oar out
anyway . . .

"Eastern Shore, Smith Island"

And so on, page after page. Then what to make of Ms. Vendler's extravagant praise? Certainly, a failure of critical judgement, and beyond that a sign of something weirdly amiss in contemporary letters.

I should perhaps defer speaking of poems in a language I do not know and cannot read, but the poems of the Hebrew poet, Yehuda Amichai,⁸ as translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, have offered a useful means of comparison with the work of a few of our more immediate American contemporaries. In returning partway to my opening remarks I must again refer briefly to the poetry of a place and a situation all too representative of our present world, and which in these poems has been written of with so much insight and passion.

⁸ THE SELECTED POETRY OF YEHUDA AMICHAÏ, by *Yehuda Amichai*. Trans. by *Chana Bloch* and *Stephen Mitchell*. University of California Press. \$14.95p.

And so farewell to you, who will not slumber,
 for all was in our words, a world of sand.
 From this day forth, you turn into the dreamer
 of everything: the world within your hand.

Farewell, death's bundles, suitcase packed with
 waiting.
 Threads, feathers, holy chaos. Hair held fast.
 For look, what will not be, no hand is writing;
 and what was not the body's will not last.
 "Farewell"

Here, subtly imprinted, is the unmistakable tone and historical burden, of which one can say: this is our time, this speaks for all. "Beautiful is the world that wakes up early for evil . . ." ("In the Middle of This Century"). It is not the only world we know, but it is one of which we must somehow speak, hold in conscience—or, it may be, remain silent before it. And the silence so common among us, in spite of our books and our talk, is heavy, dense with memory and premonition.

And silently, like a doctor or mother, the days
 bent over me
 and started to whisper to one another, while the
 grass
 already was laid flat by the bitter wind
 on the slope of hills I will never walk again.
 "Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela"

A poetry quietly eloquent with the pain, the losses and displacements of our time, in which one writes with the only instrument at hand.

While considering the books for this review I have had in mind a recent newspaper photograph of a street in Grozny, in Chechnya, a scene of almost total ruin: buildings shattered and gaping, trolley lines torn up, streets clogged with debris, a few trees still standing in leaf. A solitary couple, a man and woman, plastic bags in hand, with a child in a buggy, are making their way as if returning from market. But in that bleak setting there is nothing else alive or moving. Set beside this chilling scene, the poems of a Dave Smith may appear as an extreme of frivolity. Anthony Hecht's assembly of poems on Death are rather like a deck of playing cards, skillfully made to be sure; but the death and devastation revealed in this picture are another matter altogether. And one thinks: might this one day be Peoria, Trenton, or Denver? In our shifting and volatile world it seems a not unlikely possibility. And where then will our poets be?

The poems of Yehuda Amichai are proof that despite adversity, or perhaps because of it, a redeeming vitality is latent in the dialogue between society and the poet. In our case at present one half of that dialogue is largely missing.

DEAN FLOWER

Reconstructing Henry James

THERE IS A CERTAIN APPEAL IN HAVING A FRESH POINT OF VIEW about the life and character of Henry James.¹ Ever since F. O. Matthiessen's *The James Family*, a compendium of writings by William, Henry, Alice and their father which appeared in 1947, we have heard about the extraordinary intellectual energy of this privileged family, whose origins so interestingly combine the merchantile wealth of an upstate New York millionaire—the grandfather, William of Albany—with the quarrelsome intellectual fervor of his least favorite son, the father, Henry James, Senior. One biographer after another has offered to account for the genius of either William or Henry or both, since to disentangle the biography of one from the other was hardly possible, nor could their imperious father be left out of the account. C. Hartley Grattan's *The Three Jameses: A Family of Minds* (1932) was the first attempt, but after Matthiessen's compendium came several more: F. W. Dupee's concise and still valuable *Henry James* (1951), Leon Edel's *Henry James: The Untried Years* (1953), the first volume of what claimed to be the "definitive" study, Robert LeClair's *Young Henry James* (1955), and Quentin Anderson's *The American Henry James* (1957), which was not strictly a biography but an effort to read Henry Senior's ideas in the works of Henry Junior. Edel's increasingly reverential biography came to dominate the field, as successive volumes appeared in 1962 and 1969, climaxed by *Henry James: The Master* in 1972. Edel propounded an Oedipal theory for Henry's "obscure hurt" which kept him out of the Civil War and relegated him to a life of celibacy, "feminine" passivity, and latent homoerotic tendencies—all of which made possible, Edel argued, the magisterially sublimated passions of his fiction.

But what about Alice, the youngest of the five children and the only female? Matthiessen had richly included Alice's voice in his collage of family writings, and Edel edited her diaries in 1964, but it took Jean Strouse's beautifully lucid *Alice James: A Biography* in 1980 to throw a different sort of light on the family mentality and expose its entrenched, all-too-typical misogyny. Then too William, whose "thought" ever since Ralph Barton Perry's work in 1935 had been the focus of biographical study, came under more critical psychological scrutiny. First Howard Feinstein in *Becoming William James* (1986) and then R. W. B. Lewis in *The Jameses: A Family Narrative* (1991) dramatized an increasingly troubled

¹ HENRY JAMES: *The Young Master*, by Sheldon M. Novick. Random House. \$35.00.

and embattled elder brother. While Leon Edel had theorized a lifelong Jacob-and-Esau rivalry between the two “geniuses,” and repeated it in *Henry James: A Life* (1985), a one-volume condensation of his five-volume work, Feinstein and Lewis revealed a far less impressive figure, one whose protracted struggle to find an identity and a career scarred the rest of his life. Lewis tended to minimize the conflict between the two brothers, however, seeing little but affectionate raillery in the critical judgments William liked to dish out to his “younger, weaker, vainer” brother. In fact Lewis and another recent biographer—Fred Kaplan in *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (1992)—have not, apart from the treatment of William, significantly questioned Edel’s version of the James family.

They might well have. When *Biography of Broken Fortunes*, Jane Maher’s study of the two younger brothers, Garth Wilkinson (“Wilkie”) and Robertson (“Bob”), appeared in 1986, it revealed unambiguously how their father, who was excessively tender toward the elder brothers, ignored the younger two, denied their intellectual and artistic gifts, led them into the Civil War, banished them to a doomed enterprise in Florida after the war—another of Henry Senior’s disastrous investments, casting his sons as carpetbaggers—and refused to hear their cries for help. That the mother whom Henry revered, according to Edel, could join her husband in the harrying criticism of Wilkie and Bob suggests just how selective the story has been. More recently Alfred Habegger’s *The Father: A Life of Henry James, Sr.* (1984) has provided a wealth of material for a radical revision of this great “family of minds” that Matthiessen once celebrated so unquestioningly. For example, Habegger shows conclusively that Henry Senior’s famous “educational system,” which yanked the children from one school to another, from this tutor to that, from art to law to accounting to physics, in this country or abroad, wherever they happened to live—all in the name of preserving their freedom from the dead weight of institutions—was in fact so confused and contradictory as to be oppressive. And apparently at some level it was *meant* to be. Emphasizing the prolonged horror of the father’s leg amputations when he was young, Habegger argues that his deprivation and suffering were visited upon the children, perversely: it was “an education so chaotic it was as numbing as Father’s amputation.”²

So a new consideration of Henry’s life is, if not overdue, at least welcome. And Sheldon Novick seems to have provided one. A lawyer and law school professor who wrote a highly praised biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1989, Novick comes to the voluminous James material with a lawyer’s impulse toward advocacy. He has learned much from Habegger and holds no brief for Edel. He claims to have “penetrated the private reality” of his subject, chiefly by means of immersion in the autobiographical writings, arguing that here James left

² For allowing me to draw upon her wide knowledge of the James family biographical literature I wish to offer special thanks to Linda Henchey.

us both “a huge self-portrait” and innumerable clues to its decipherment. What James most wanted to keep private and yet make known, Novick claims to have determined, was the fact of his homosexuality—the real thing, not just a latent or late-blooming Edelian homoerotic tendency. Novick has decided that he may quote passages from James’s autobiography—*A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), and *The Middle Years* (1917)—as if they were direct evidence of what James experienced when he was seven or twelve or fourteen. He permits himself to paraphrase what James wrote in essays or in fiction as if such language documented actual events in James’s daily life. If he decides that Henry’s experience in visiting wounded soldiers in 1862 resembled Walt Whitman’s, Novick will quote a passage from Whitman as if it were James’s. This sort of thing is not only highhanded, it’s eerie:

“Do you like my father and mother very much?” Harry asked him, familiarly.

“Dear me, yes, they’re charming people.”

Harry received this in silence, and then unexpectedly, but affectionately, remarked, “You’re a jolly old humbug!” For some reason, the words made Thomson change color, whereupon Harry turned red himself, and the pupil and master exchanged a longish glance.

Jamesians will recognize this fine moment from “The Pupil” (1891) where Morgan Moreen catches his tutor, Pemberton, in a polite half-truth. That Novick simply changes the names in order to claim he knows what happened between thirteen-year-old Harry and his tutor Mr. Thomson when the James family was in Paris in 1856 is, of course, outrageous. But might it have some deeper justification?

Novick explains in a footnote that scenes like this one from “The Pupil” were also used in “Gabrielle de Bergerac,” a story of 1869, and in *What Maisie Knew* in 1897. His only plausible argument here is not that such a scene must have taken place, but rather that Morgan and his family offer a closer parallel to the Jameses than previous biographers have imagined. They were not so wealthy nor so cultivated as they pretended. They led a gypsy-like existence during the 1850s in Europe, spending too much for a fine rental on the Champs-Élysées, retreating to Boulogne-sur-mer when money was short, shifting to Nice or Geneva or back to America. Henry may indeed have felt, as Pemberton does in the story, that “he had never seen a family so brilliantly equipped for failure.” Dinner table conversation at the Jameses’ was reportedly just as lively and uninhibited as Pemberton reports the Moreens’ to have been, and the James family language may have been just as unintelligible to an outsider; Pemberton calls it “an ingenious dialect of their own—a sort of spoken cipher, which [he] at first took for Volapuk. . . .” As Morgan wittily explains, “It’s the family language—Ultramoreen.” Novick could in fact have done more to document the “ingenious dialect” of the Jameses, especially its familial traits and its sophistication. It can be

uncanny to hear in Alice's diaries and in Robertson's more eloquent letters some of the same metaphoric flights and ironic twists that their father used or that flavors the epistolary exchanges of William and Henry.

What Novick does document is that Henry Senior did *not* inherit one-twelfth of his father's three million dollar fortune (the figure other biographers have used), but a smaller fraction of one-twelfth of 1.2 million; that William of Albany was *not* the second wealthiest man in the state after John Jacob Astor (as has been customarily claimed), but well below the Van Rensselaers, the Clintons, and others in Albany, never mind the rest of the state; that the James houses in Albany and New York, both on Washington Square and on West Fourteenth Street, were all very modest dwellings; and that Henry Senior's yearly income put him appreciably below the average "upper middle class" family in New York in the early 1840s. Where Edel had described a family of affluence and privilege, dashing off to the Louvre and the Uffizi at whim, Novick constructs an insecure, shabby-genteel family that was constantly threatened by the "troubled, restless, violent" behavior of the father. Not only did Henry Senior invest excessively in Horace Greeley's *Tribune* and in the doomed Brook Farm experiment, Novick argues, but he ignored or neglected his family, disappeared inexplicably when they were abroad, and rationalized his own selfish decisions—or indecisions—as concern for the children. "It is a sad commentary," writes Novick in a footnote, "that this abusive behavior is generally praised or viewed with amused tolerance by the family's biographers."

Henry James himself would not have agreed with Novick. He and William consistently defended their father, covered for him, denied there was anything like "abusive behavior." Henry declared at the start of his autobiography, "we wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions." It is worth pausing on that *wholesomely*. Clearly James saw his father's restless ineffectuality but he also saw an extraordinary moral thinker whose restlessness could be a virtue, whose tolerance for paradox could be a strength. In Novick's courtroom there's little tolerance for paradox. He suggests that Henry Senior's restlessness during the 1850s had much to do with Mary James's closing the bedroom door and their ceasing to have children, that his mysterious departures and excursions may have been for sex. The truth here is much more complicated and interesting than Novick allows. Henry Senior was indeed given to conversational intimacies with women, and did occasionally utter sexually bold statements which might well be misinterpreted. In 1872 he entered a public debate about adultery to argue that marriage encourages a man's spiritual growth because it limits his sexual desire to one woman:

I marry my wife under the impression that she is literally perfect, and is going to exhaust my capacity of desire ever after. Ere long I discover my mistake . . . My good habits, my good breeding, my hearty respect

for my wife . . . prevent my ever letting her suspect the conflict going on in my bosom; but there it is nevertheless, a ceaseless conflict between law and liberty, between conscience and inclination.

The nuance here is that Henry Senior may not have been confessing anything, merely using “himself” hypothetically, as in “Let’s take the case of a man who marries his wife under the impression that. . . .” But on the other hand he might also have been using a very public forum to reveal something very private. He was not averse to such things, and may even have expected to be misunderstood. Alfred Habegger, who is clearly Novick’s source, sums up the father’s indiscreet behavior much more understandingly. He was not the philanderer Novick imagines, but he “liked to play [games] with the ladies of New York, London, Paris, Newport, Boston, and Cambridge. Not adultery, not the bedroom, but a rarefied and involuted though still intimate conversational expression of sensual desire, culminating on at least one occasion in a passionate and forceful kiss.” Dare I say like father, like son? It is almost shocking to discover how closely the novelist imitated his father in this behavior. What *were* all those conversations he had with women and all those letters he wrote to them—Minny Temple, Grace Norton, Lizzie Boott, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Mary Ward, Elizabeth Robins, Fanny Kemble, Edith Wharton, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and all the rest—if not rarefied, involuted, and intimate expressions of a sensual desire? Novick might just as well have hinted that Henry Junior was a bit of a philanderer too.

Deeply inscribed in the James family annals is the story of father’s “vastation.” After dinner one day in 1844, while they were staying in England, he was visited by a terrifying evil spirit, a baleful shape that hovered palpably in the room, “raying out from his foetid personality influences fatal to life.” It was the onset of a profound depression that did not begin to lift until Henry Senior discovered in the writings of Swedenborg a description of his affliction, a name for it—vastation—and the spiritual guidance toward a cure. Henry Senior set down the vivid details in his memoirs, which were published in 1884; Henry Junior repeated the story in *Notes of a Son and Brother* in 1913, and virtually every biographer has done so as well. Leon Edel argues that the father’s affliction deeply affected his novelist son, conferring upon him a lifelong sense of debility or “obscure hurt”—a vastation of his own. It was both a physical and a psychological inheritance from his father, whose amputated leg had foreshadowed the spiritual trauma. Sheldon Novick decides, however, to sidestep this psychoanalytic argument—or any other. He omits the vastation experience altogether, explaining in a footnote that there is “no independent evidence that the story . . . is anything other than fiction.” Nobody mentioned it in the letters of 1844, he says, and besides Henry Senior already knew Swedenborg’s writings by this time. So in Novick’s book it simply does not happen.

Now clearly the idea here is to release Henry James from decades of

suspicion as to his psychic and sexual health. Novick emphasizes that Henry avoided, especially when he went abroad, much of the family tendency toward invalidism. That he walked and rode horseback, traveled widely and socialized vigorously, even aggressively. That he developed great appetites which would probably have been censured at home. That he escaped the debilitating effects of his father's underlying Calvinism. In all this Novick rightly wishes to free the novelist from Leon Edel's oppressive conception of him as "sexually diffident" and "effete," a writer whose "low amatory coefficient" dictated a lifelong celibacy. That seems to me a worthy project. For in a sense Edel's emphasis over the years has only generated another version of the rumor—started in the 1920s by Van Wyck Brooks and Ernest Hemingway and accepted unquestioningly in the later 1940s by such influential critics as Lionel Trilling, F. O. Matthiessen, and R. P. Blackmur—that James was sexually impotent.

But again Novick carries his argument too far. The vastation may be entirely a fiction, but that does not mean it didn't happen. Evidently Henry Senior's ghost story—whether in its written form or otherwise—got communicated to all his children. The vastation epitomized too much of his experience of life for it to be ignored or denied. Habegger argues that it was a repetition in condensed form of the father's years of bedridden infection climaxed by successive leg amputations (without anesthetic of any sort) when he was seventeen, a devastation from which he never could recover and that governed the rest of his life.³ Small wonder that its seismic echoes and aftershocks can be felt throughout his son's fiction, whether in the privations and renunciations that define so many of his characters or in the very language of his deepest recognitions: "We work in the dark. . . . Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." The austerity of that vision—its invisible beasts in the jungle, its many benches of desolation and altars of the dead—is unthinkable without father's great confrontation with that foetid thing in the parlor of 1844.

Was the brotherly love and admiration between William and Henry another of the family's fictions? Novick goes out of his way to suggest that on William's side it was: that William wanted Henry to suffer as he had done, that he envied Henry's success in writing, that he betrayed Henry's trust and criticized his expensive tastes, his "effete" stories, his irresponsible life abroad. Irritable and condescending as he could be, William nevertheless begged for Henry's help when he had trouble writing a review. And Henry gave it. His consistent answer to William's hostility was patience, forgiveness, and affection. But Novick thinks that Henry sometimes took a cruel revenge. When William abruptly ended

³ Habegger suggests the interesting possibility that Herman Melville, who knew the James family in Albany, could have been influenced when he began writing *Moby-Dick* in 1850 by the "wildly speculative" lectures of Henry James, Sr., an angry man who stumped about the lecture platform on his cork leg.

his 1874 visit to his brother in Rome, discomfited by both its “blood-soaked” history and its seductive *dolce far niente* appeal, Henry seems to have responded by caricaturing him in the figure of Babcock, the earnest little clergyman in *The American* who has been sent to Europe by his congregation to acquire culture. Ignoring the rich comedy of Babcock’s precipitate escape from the wicked Old World, Novick claims that “William was coldly satirized.” Supposedly Grace Norton recognized the cruel portrayal too and “trembled like a guilty thing,” but when William saw himself in Babcock (“I think you found my ‘moral reaction’ excessive when I was abroad”) Novick thinks he still “displayed Babcock’s obtuseness.” But listen to the tone of voice that William actually used, in his letter of July 5, 1876:

My dear Harry,—

Your letters breathe more and more a spirit of domestication in the modern Babylon [London] which is very pleasant to me to receive. I suppose from your gilded and snobbish heights you think of us here with great pity, but for my part I hurl it back at you, being on the whole contented with my outward lot. . . .

Your second instalment of *The American* is prime. The morbid little clergyman is worthy of Ivan Sergeitch [Turgenev]. I was not a little amused to find some of my own attributes in him,—I think you found my “moral reaction” excessive when I was abroad. But I do detest the monthly, part way of publication, except in George Eliot. . . .

Yours ever,
W.J.

Obtuse? William clearly *delighted* in the resemblance. The supple wit and poise of his letter are worlds away from Babcock.

Novick makes an even bigger mistake, however, when he comes to deal with his subject’s sexuality. He claims that Henry James knew about adult male homosexuality from actual experience, that his “*initiation première*” occurred with the young Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1865, that he had another affair with Pavel Zhoukovski, a dilettante Russian artist whom he met in Paris in 1877, and that Henry’s fiction attests to these experiences by its vividness and specificity. “A Light Man,” for example, describes unambiguously (according to Novick) one man bringing another to climax. All these claims dissolve when the evidence is examined in context. The supposedly sexual “fusions” that Henry speaks of in his memories of 1865 refer instead to a convergence of events, both endings and beginnings, that marked the outset of his career. He wrote passionately about them all right, not about “fusions” with Wendell Holmes. And the erotic climax of “A Light Man” turns out to be entirely metaphoric and linguistic. Henry’s language may have been “impudent” and “audacious” (Novick’s terms), but it was not meant literally. In any case, why assume Henry actually had, or needed to have, such experi-

ences? Was he not by 1869 worldly enough to be one upon whom nothing is lost?

What *can* be said for Novick, however, is that at least he recognizes the capacity in James for a passionate expressive sexuality—not just late in his career, as Edel argues, but from its inception. That seems to me refreshingly right. Edel keeps assuming that James was naive—“apparently unaware” of his own “libidinal” imagery in “A Light Man.” In fact whenever the notion of overt sexuality comes up Edel likes to say James kept his art “carefully disengaged from disturbing passions.” For those who wonder if James was homosexual Edel writes, “To be sure he had young male friends: but here too all was coolness and reserve.” How sterile all these formulations sound, how aloof and ascetic, how distant and different from the passionate intensities we encounter in page after page of his work!

Ironically enough, Gilbert Osmond, the icy villain of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), embodies Edel’s conception of Henry James rather well: a sterile dilettante, an aloof aesthete, a cold egotist. Edel views Osmond as a case of critical self-portraiture: “he is what James might have become if he had allowed snobbery to prevail over humanity, and arrogance and egotism over urbanity. . . .” Isabel Archer too is seen as another aspect of the author’s egotism. The oddity is that so much of the snobbery and egotism James had to resist are of Edel’s own manufacture. But Novick fails to come up with anything better. He sees in Osmond’s nastiness a bitter portrayal of Zhoukovski, the homosexual artist who supposedly disappointed Henry in love: “It was not a portrait, it was a wicked caricature.” Never mind that Zhoukovski resembles Osmond about as much as Bertie Wooster resembles Niccolò Machiavelli. Then Novick’s crowning absurdity is to cast James himself in drag as Osmond-Zhoukovski’s old lover: “Costumed as Madame Merle, James performed his greatest impersonation.” You hardly know whether to laugh or cry.

One might well come away with the feeling that biography is a miserable genre, offering up a transparently fraudulent and reductive story as if it were the basis of the writer’s own work, the precondition of its truth. There are moments when Novick’s reconstruction of James is rewarding, or at least not *unrewarding*, but there is little hope that his next volume—this one stops in 1881—will be any more successful in displacing the suave sterilities of Leon Edel. Meanwhile we have the rich rewards of Alfred Habegger’s *The Father*, which offers in its quiet scholarly way extraordinary new insights into the whole family. Consider for example the Jamesian theme—William H. Gass identified it decades ago—of the “high brutality of good intentions.” It involves the recognition that such wonderfully good and well-meaning characters as Ralph Touchett and Fleda Vetch, Milly Theale and Maggie Verver, can be as destructive in their way as Iago was in his. Habegger’s biography makes it abundantly clear where that idea about moral fervor came from, not just from “father’s ideas” but from the tyrannical manipulative goodness of the man himself.

MARK JARMAN

The Hunter Davenport

WHAT WAS MODERNISM? As he did in his previous collections of essays, *The Geography of the Imagination* and *Every Force Evolves a Form*, Guy Davenport provides us with a rich, complex, fascinating, and at times maddening and tendentious answer in his latest collection.¹ Although he claims modestly that the only unifying principle for these essays is “their being written on the same typewriter,” nevertheless, it is clear that the period that most intensely engages Davenport’s attention, especially in literature and painting, extends from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, roughly from the publication of *Song of Myself* to the beginning of Abstract Expressionism. Davenport’s learning extends widely, of course, and he can show as much interest in ancient Greek statuary as in contemporary American poetry, but his milieu is Modernism. He knows that Modernism has had its day, and yet, he persists with wonderful vigor and enthusiasm in appreciating and praising contemporary art and literature that are part of the Modernist tradition. He shows a piquant dislike for things Post-modernist and for much that goes on in the Post-modern world. Basically he is himself a Modernist type. Radical in his own experimentation, as much an American original as Joseph Cornell whose shadow boxes he loves, Davenport seems to have grown conservative with age and to take increasing comfort from a handful of exquisite preferences and cranky opinions.

Davenport’s Modernism is a web of correspondences, coincidences, symbiotic relationships, and uncanny resemblances. His sense of history, spatial and simultaneous, rather than linear and consequential, is on display in the following paragraph from “Stanley Spencer and David Jones,” in which he notes an important similarity between the poet and the painter.

David Jones in *The Anathémata* creates something like a Spencerian unfolding and conflating of time. The Mass reiterates an event, the Crucifixion, which itself was a repetition (with a new and final victim) of an age-old sacrifice. Jones tells us that his instigation for the poem was in realizing that a British soldier whom he saw on duty in Palestine in the 1930s was in some sense identical to a Roman soldier in the

¹ THE HUNTER GRACCHUS AND OTHER PAPERS ON LITERATURE AND ART, by Guy Davenport. Counterpoint. \$25.00.

same place in the time of Christ. This kind of historical rhyme is characteristic of modernist art. Pound and Eliot (and Rudyard Kipling and Charles Doughty before them) saw the two great empires, Roman and British, as a historical recurrence. The idea is throughout Spengler, whom Jones read with interest; and in his friend Christopher Dawson. Joyce's is the most eloquent shaping of this idea.

Davenport believes in history and, for all his surrealist tendencies, in reality, like most Modernists. So it should be no surprise that he repudiates Gnosticism. His consideration of the influence of St. Paul on Christianity, "II Timothy," includes a bracing dismissal of "the near-idiotic Gnostic gibberish from *Nag Hammadi*." A world of correspondences must not only be meaningful but real. He praises Spencer for his "insistence that the world (not a world created ideally by a choice of attentions) is there."

Davenport's quarrel with Post-modernism seems to be with its attitude toward history. Modernists believe in history. Post-modernists do not. Praising Donald Barthelme in "Style as the Protagonist in Donald Barthelme," he notes in Barthelme's story "Paraguay" the echoes of "Kafka, Mandelstam, Piranesi," and goes on to assert that "[r]esonant quotation belongs to modernism as one of its major devices." Yet our moment, according to Davenport, is marred by a dependence on TV, the computer, CD players, and so on, technology instead of imagination, information instead of knowledge, hedonism instead of history. He and Wendell Berry, both of whom live in Kentucky, share more than a state. In "Micrographs," Davenport provides an acerbic spoof of the current situation.

Postmodern

The bomb, you see, has already dropped. Nobody noticed. The young, born dead, could move, breathe through their mouths, and watch the soaps and commercials on TV, having a good time. The bomb has dropped. All the pigs are trotters up, all the trees charcoal. Never wanting a change, only more of the same but better, we were of no mind to notice. It takes attention to notice things. Attention takes brains.

So it does. It would annoy Davenport even further to be told that the young do not share his anxiety about "the bomb." It is no longer something they relate to. They use their brains to devise means of moving, breathing, having a good time, and staying alive. Nothing irks the older generation more than when the younger generation refuses to share its anxieties. When that happens, the older generation begins to regard those anxieties as moral imperatives. For Davenport's parents it

must have been economic collapse; for Davenport, it is thermonuclear annihilation. As a child who grew up with atom bomb dreams, and as an adult who still experiences them, I do not know if it is a bad thing that the young have turned their attention elsewhere. The causes of their own anxieties seem as dire and irremediable as the Cold War did to me.

But I sound reproachful already, and I want to save my reproaches for later. As a reader and a civilized individual, Davenport is the best of company. The pleasures of Davenport derive from the hunt for historical resonance. Catching the scent with him, hearing the echo he hears when a contemporary poet strikes the note of a Modern master, seeing a color in a painting that recalls the inking of a newspaper photograph, these form the excitement of his pursuit. They are the thrills of erudition, of one man's tradition and his individual talent.

In the title essay and the first of the collection, Davenport investigates every nook and cranny of Franz Kafka's two stories, "The Hunter Gracchus" and "The Hunter Gracchus: A Fragment." He discovers echoes of Wilkie Collins, Nietzsche, and Flaubert, sees the atmosphere of a painting by de Chirico, and shows us the link between the Latin *gracchus* for grackle and the Czech word for it, *kavka*. At times his enthusiasm for correspondence and resonance carries him away. Considering the first paragraph of "The Hunter Gracchus" and its image of boys playing dice on a harbor wall, he takes off on a flight of allusive fantasy.

"History is a child building a sandcastle by the sea," said Heraclitus two and a half millennia earlier, "and that child is the whole majesty of man's power in the world." Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, with its imagery of shipwreck and pathless seas, was published in 1897 when Kafka was fourteen. "God does not play at dice," said Einstein (whom Kafka may have met at a Prague salon they are both known to have attended). Kafka was not certain that He didn't.

Mostly Davenport plays with a full deck of illuminations and glosses, here dealing an observation from W. H. Auden (in Kafka "*as if . . . is treated as is*") and there offering one of his own brilliant apothegms ("Poe's mind was round, fat, and white; Kafka's cubical, lean, and transparent"). At the heart of this dazzling display of wit and learning, he produces the kind of insight that can change the way we read a great writer. Following several paragraphs quoted from Hermann Broch, comparing Kafka and Joyce, Davenport describes with chilling precision the dimensions of Kafka's greatness.

Prophecy. All of Kafka is about history that had not yet happened. His sister Ottla would die in the camps, along with all of his kin. The German word for *insect* (*Ungeziefer*, "vermin") that Kafka used for Gregor Samsa is the same word the Nazis used for Jews, and *insect*

extermination was one of their obscene euphemisms, as George Steiner has pointed out.

Quite soon after the Second World War it was evident that with *The Castle* and *The Trial*, and especially with "In the Penal Colony," Kafka was accurately describing the mechanics of totalitarian barbarity.

For a Modernist of Davenport's generation, World War II is as crucial as World War I was for Kafka's generation. The first war signaled Modernism's arrival; the second marked the beginning of its departure. Modern art that prophesies and prefigures the events of World War II, especially its atrocities, is of special interest to Davenport, since it confirms the reality of history. "Civilization and Its Opposite in the 1940s" begins with a consideration of the Russian exile painter Pavel Tchelitchew and his 1942 painting *Cache-Cache* or *Hide-and-Seek*, subjects Davenport has treated in his essay "Tchelitchew" in *The Geography of the Imagination*. He reads the painting, which shows children among the branches of a tree, playing hide and go seek, as a depiction of the Holocaust, and sees also in Tchelitchew's 1938 painting *Phenomena* the ominous shape of a mushroom cloud. Along with Tchelitchew's paintings he detects images of what he calls "heroic innocence," the sort that endured the outrages of World War II, in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, and Balthus' paintings of "daydreaming adolescents." "The arts," he concludes, "are rich in lucky prophecies."

Not only does Davenport believe in history, he puts his faith in it. He ends "Civilization and Its Opposite in the 1940s" by stating, "In another fifty years we will know more about the forties; it takes the perspective of one century to know another." He brings this same faith to the subject of one of the best essays in the book, "Guernica." Picasso's allegorical depiction of the best remembered atrocity of the Spanish Civil War, the Fascist bombing of the Basque town on the northern coast of Spain in 1937, elicits some of Davenport's most pointed and astute criticism.

The painting streams to the left like a Hebrew text. It is, like Courbet's *Studio*, both a room and an exterior. It is both night and day. There are visual puns: eyes are teardrops; the horse is a crumpled newspaper (or a destroyed book: Nazi bonfires of books were burning as Picasso painted). The warrior's lined hand is a popular graph of Fate. The bull's tail is a wisp of smoke. The deepest allusion may be to the painted cave at Altamira (at Santander, a few miles from Guernica), and to other prehistoric caves with their bulls and horses.

Though he speculates that *Guernica* "may well not be 'a painting'" since it is more like "a Magdalenian glyph, a poster, a sign," nevertheless he believes that it "will, in time, be 'a picture.'" Meanwhile he sees it in literary terms, as news that has stayed news, "as sharp as the photographs

of Robert Capa or Margaret Bourke-White, and as timely as news reports from Bosnia and Northern Ireland."

The Modern art that Davenport admires, whether it be a painting or a work of literature, is a locus of allusion, radiating in all directions to link with precursors, contemporaries, and descendants. But it must also have a style that he can appreciate. In "Guernica," for example, he hints at his distaste for Abstract Expressionism by stating that Picasso's influence on Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky was "disastrous." He reveals a preference for figurative and symbolic painting in his essay, "Grant Wood's *The Good Influence*," in which he associates Wood's subtle art with the "civilized and yet keenly observant" satire of Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken, and James Thurber. He admits in "On Reading" that he is "something of an aesthete," and early on discovered that he could not abide ineptitude. A healthy intolerance like that must underlie his judgements, and may even influence his very definition of Modernism. Davenport's passions are as telling as his preferences.

One of these passions is for the Shakers, and especially for their founder, Ann Lee, the eighteenth-century mystic of the Manchester cotton mills. Her saying "every force evolves a form" resonates in much of the modern art that Davenport admires, from the architecture of Le Corbusier to the poetry of the Black Mountain School. As the title of one of his collections of essays shows, it shapes his own thinking as well. Davenport associates the Shakers with ancient Sparta and the Essenes of Christ's day. "Shaker Light" is an ode to the elegance of a religious sect that has produced some of the most beautiful utilitarian objects in human history.

That an angel might sit in a Shaker chair no Shaker ever doubted. They saw angels around deathbeds, they heard angels singing and wrote down the music and words. They shared the angels' freedom of movement. . . . Two Shaker sisters once went to the moon, they said, in rocking chairs, and brought back two songs . . .

Furniture and tools evolve just like living organisms; the caveman's sharpened stick became, in time, the fork. It was implicit in the cut of Shaker belief that a fork should be a fork and nothing else. They therefore rethought tools and furniture as strictly useful objects: what we perceive as character and dignity in Shaker design is their triumphant demonstration that form is good sense.

Of equal importance to Davenport is that the Shakers have been "a good century and a half ahead of the times" in architectural innovation. "Practically everything we call modern," he says, "is implicit in Shaker design." As a subject the Shakers allow Davenport to perform his allusive magic. We hear about the relation of Thomas Merton, Aaron Copland, and James Fenimore Cooper to the Shakers, and are told in a parenthetical comment, "Marx and Engels studied the Shakers."

Reading Davenport when he is in high gear, as he is in "Shaker Light,"

is a little like visiting Mr. Wizard in his shop on Saturday morning TV in the 1950s. He combines discovery and invention with a whiz-bang joyousness. The difference between him and Mr. Wizard is that like the Modernists Davenport most esteems he has a global vision of art, culture, and society. Ann Lee is to Davenport what Lancelot Andrewes was to T. S. Eliot. And as Clifford Douglas with his social credit was to Ezra Pound, so Charles Fourier with his utopian schemes is to Davenport. Readers who know Davenport's previous collections of essays and his book of stories, *Da Vinci's Bicycle*, should be familiar with his passion for Fourier and fascination with Fourierism. Davenport often locates Fourier among the connections and associations that most excite him. So, as he considers the Shakers in their intellectual context, it is no surprise to see the following line of reasoning.

They reinvented the world. They invented a new kind of light, a new kind of space. One of the debates of the eighteenth century was what human nature might be, under its crust of civilization, under the varnish of culture and manners. Rousseau had an answer. Thomas Jefferson had an answer. One of the most intriguing answers was that of Charles Fourier, who was born in Besançon two years before the Shakers arrived in New York.

Charles Fourier's schemes ranged from the creation of communities for orphans of the Napoleonic wars where the children would be fed raspberries several times a day to a plan to make the oceans drinkable by turning them into lemonade. Davenport connects him with several utopian experiments in nineteenth-century America, including Brook Farm (satirized by Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance*). "Fourierism," claims Davenport, "was Shakerism for intellectuals." The intellectual difference was that Fourier's communities were based on indulgence whereas the Shakers believed in abstinence. Although Davenport avers that "Freud and Marx stole ideas from Fourier by the handful," it is hard, if not impossible, to accept that Fourier is as significant as Freud, Marx, Rousseau, or Jefferson.

Not all the enthusiasms of an enthusiast like Davenport are going to be appealing, no matter how skillfully he presents them. Personally I do not share his taste in contemporary American poetry. The derivative experimentation of Ronald Johnson and Jonathan Williams leaves me cold. I do not think we will appreciate the father of the Black Mountain school of poetry, Charles Olson, any more in fifty years than we do now, if we do at all. And I am not convinced in the least that O. Henry is a writer to be compared to Guy de Maupassant or Stephen Crane. In "O. Henry," the brief passage Davenport quotes from Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* in order to demonstrate how O. Henry would have made it better shows up everything he quotes from O. Henry. Is there no accounting for taste? As a Stephen Crane fan, I am struck by the following assertion in Davenport's essay on Crane:

Tolstoy we watch; Balzac we listen to; Joyce we follow. But Crane at his best gets under our skin and stays there. . . . How he does it we have no science of knowing.

Yet when I think about this, I realize that there are parts of Tolstoy, Balzac, and Joyce that I do have under my skin, just as surely as I have the beginning of "The Open Boat" and parts of *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Before I close, I have to mention a couple of tendencies in Davenport that I find particularly tendentious. One is his willingness to apologize for Ezra Pound's anti-Semitism. He shares this bias with many Pound critics. In "Civilization and Its Opposite in the 1940s," he concocts this excuse: "Pound was, even to the layman's eye, paranoid schizophrenic, a feature of which was an overt anti-Semitism." Pound himself was more honest about the source of his prejudice, calling it his "suburban anti-Semitism," which is closer to the facts of his upbringing in Pennsylvania during the great influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Why Pound clung to this attitude throughout his adult life cannot be explained away by a layman's diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. Then in "Journal I" Davenport throws a strange little snit about Gentile circumcision, calling it "a cruel and useless mutilation," and concludes "a male who has never known the sensuality of a foreskin, both for masturbation and for making love, cannot know what he has been so criminally bereft of." I cannot help but be reminded here of Pound's own curious theories about how Jewish males compensated for the loss of their foreskins. Finally, Davenport shows the lapsed Baptist's disdain for religion ("II Timothy"), and yet, two figures he admires are the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton ("Tom and Gene") and the young Nazarene ascetic whom he calls Yeshua ("Micrographs"). He is pleased to report that Merton once confided that salvation cannot come through the church. He also shares the conventional notion that St. Paul distorted the Christianity taught by Jesus. There seems to be a certain lack of self-awareness when he deals with these subjects.

Art is the church of the aesthete, and Davenport has displaced his religious feeling onto art. In "The Drawing of Paul Cadmus," he could be describing prayer when he states, "Art is a perfection of attention and the opposite of indifference." He puts his faith in history or, more accurately, posterity. Considering his passionate belief in Modernism, which he maintains is not a breakup but an integration, I am tempted to call him a Christian *manqué*. When he takes on the pernicious forces of Post-modernism (In "Journal II" he calls deconstruction "a hostile cross-examination of a helpless witness"), his voice has a prophetic ring. As Davenport sees it, Modernism was an attempt to re-create an essential meaning for existence, to put back together the shattered faith of millennia through works of art. Post-modernism not only shrugs off this project but cynically attacks it. In these memorable essays, Guy Davenport shores his integrated fragments, like faith, against an unfriendly present and an unpredictable future.

SUSAN BALÉE

Days of Whine and Posers

IF THE LITERARY ART OF THIS ERA IS WHINING, then its science must be Victimology. So, at least, one would conclude by reading a couple dozen of this year's new novels and short story collections—a task I have just completed for this Fiction Chronicle. Wading through thousands of pages of child abuse, desertion, depression, violence, and psychosis, I began to long for a little humor to leaven the misery. My favorite books of this last year, then, were the ones that could—at least occasionally—make me smile. The others, no matter how well-written (and there are some fine prose stylists in America today), ultimately struck me as affected and self-indulgent. To these “very serious” writers, who shall remain unnamed, I have this general advice: *Lighten up!* Or, as the writing teacher Ellen thinks in Molly Giles's “Untitled” (from the blissfully witty collection, *Creek Walk*¹), “We could throw all the stories in and have a bonfire.” Hear, hear! And on this new acid-free paper, they'd probably blaze quite nicely.

Another shared obsession in these recent novels and short story collections is “the body.” Not surprisingly, theorists in the social sciences, professors in the humanities, and (perhaps especially) biologists are also currently debating the most material aspect of our humanity. Are our bodies biologically determined, or socially constructed? If our bodies can be cloned, can we still think of ourselves as “individuals”? Do our bodies mediate or contain our “spirits,” or are we matter-and-nothing-but-matter, period?

I happened to be reading Melanie Rae Thon's collection, *First, Body*,² on the day the call for papers for the 1997 Modern Language Association convention in Toronto appeared in my mailbox. Perusing the proposed panels, I noted dozens of sessions with titles referring to “Masculinities” (Shakespearean, Embattled, Ethnic, etc.), “Gender” (and Revolution; and National Identity; and Disability, etc.), “Female Representations,” and “Queer Theory” (both of these had numerous subtitles, including my favorite: “Bending Gender in the Wild West: Sissies and Bull Dykes in Popular Print Culture”). Several titles referred directly to our corporeal selves, such as “Bodies Built for Sin,” “Essential Bodies,” “Extraordinary Bodies: The Exoticization of Physical Form,” “The Reader's Body,” “Reading the Body as Evidence,” and so forth. It's

¹ CREEK WALK AND OTHER STORIES, by *Molly Giles*. Papier-Mache Press. \$23.00.

² FIRST, BODY, by *Melanie Rae Thon*. Houghton Mifflin. \$21.95.

clear to me that whenever an idea takes firm hold in one discipline, it soon proliferates in others. We are living in the Age of Virtual Viscerality and trying to do the impossible: intellectualize spunk & sputum, blood & urine, excrement & sweat.

Some practitioners do it better than others. Michel Foucault was the best Body Man ever in literary theory (until AIDS claimed his body in 1984 and left only his lame disciples to hobble after him), and Melanie Rae Thon is making a good showing in literature proper. The title story of *First, Body* cuts to the gut of the genre. Sid Elliott, working in a hospital morgue, confronts the enormous corpse of a woman.

He was not supposed to think of her as a woman, he knew this. She was a body, female. He was not supposed to touch her thin blue hair or wrinkled eyelids—for his own sake. He was not supposed to look at her scars and imagine his mother's body—three deep puckers in one breast, a raised seam across the belly—was not supposed to see the ghost there, imprint of a son too big, taken this way, and later another scar, something else stolen while she slept.

The doctors want to open this body up, attempt to discover its mysteries, but Sid wants to honor her, treat her with dignity. The sort of dignity he is giving Roxanne, a cracked-out, smacked-out prostitute he found in the park and brought home . . . to bed.

Sid tasted every part of Roxanne's body: sweet, fleshy lobe of the ear, sinewy neck, sour pit of the arm, scarred hollow of the elbow. He sucked each finger, licked her salty palm. . . . She said, "Aren't you afraid of me?"

A moment later Sid asks her, "How would you kill me?" and Roxanne replies, "You know, with my body." Sid doesn't get it, but we readers do. This is the era of AIDS and the tenderest lover can sow an orgasm with the seeds of death. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, this cross-disciplinary focus on bodies. Illness makes us aware of our mortality, our fragile flesh, ourselves as bodies.

Alas, I wish I liked the rest of Thon's collection as much as this opening story, but the other tales take themselves too seriously. The subtlety and humor of "First, Body" dries faster than sweat in a breeze and the rest of the stories seem torpid and portentous. Characters say things like, "Every night ends if you live through it." Yeah, yeah. The reviewer rummages around for another book to keep her up all night.

Lucky (though red-eyed) reviewer: she finds *Tabloid Dreams* by Robert Olen Butler.³ Wow. Every story in this collection deserves a prize. Originality, humor, distinctive voices, drop-dead prose—Butler pos-

³ TABLOID DREAMS, by Robert Olen Butler. Henry Holt and Company. \$22.50.

sesses all of these qualities, and he lends them to every story. This is the only collection of short fiction I read that didn't have a flabby midsection. But, like Thon's collection, it scrutinized bodies galore. Butler is not immune to the collective unconscious, he simply does more with it.

The opening, "*Titanic* Victim Speaks Through Waterbed," begins with a disembodied voice floating in a strange body of water. "I've grown quite used to this existence I now have. I'm fully conscious that I'm dead." The voice belongs to a man who never really lived in his body, so did not regret its loss with the sinking of the *Titanic*. He says as much, remembering the night of his watery death.

All through that night, the fear was never physical. I didn't mind so much, in point of fact, giving up a life in my body. The body was never a terribly interesting thing to me. Except perhaps to draw in the heavy curl of the smoke of my cigar, like a Hindu's rope in the market rising as if it were a thing alive. One needs a body to smoke a good cigar.

Bodiless, his purgatory involves making him understand what he lost. "And then I was rain, and the cycle began. And I moved in the clouds and in the tides and eventually I became rivers and streams and lakes and dew and a cup of tea. Darjeeling."

The voice finally moves beyond tea water into a waterbed; above him, a couple makes love. He begins to understand the physical sensation he felt for another passenger, a woman he saved, on the last night of his life. "She stood there and she turned her face to me and I know now that she must have understood what it is to live in a body."

One hundred sixty-five pages later, this anonymous woman passenger reappears to narrate the book's end story, "*Titanic* Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle," and she too remembers that night, the man with whom she spent those last hours. However, like him, she did *not* "understand what it is to live in a body"; she could not physically connect with him any more than he could with her. "My hand moved, it's true, my right hand rose as if by its own intent and it came out toward him and I ached to put my hand on some part of his body, to touch him—it is my ache now, too—touch his hand, at least, perhaps even his cheek, but I could not."

She surmises that the foreign hotel room where she finds herself decades later—but no older—is her own version of the afterlife. She thinks, "Perhaps this is the purgatory for my betrayal, a place to show me that the words must be made flesh." The book ends with her praying for his spirit to join hers as she descends, naked, into a cold bath. As the water rises up her thighs and over her breasts, the reader may safely conclude that the disembodied male voice of the first *Titanic* story is no longer trapped in a waterbed! (Lap, lap, lap . . .) Oh, fluent, fluid Robert Olen Butler: thank you for *Tabloid Dreams*.

Of the other collections I read, the best was a reprint: Tobias Wolff's *Back in the World*, which first appeared in 1985, but is now out again as

a Vintage Contemporary.⁴ I enjoyed rereading these stories now that eleven years have heightened my appreciation and deepened my understanding of Wolff's particular skills as a short story writer. I think one of his greatest skills is the ability perfectly to convey character through dialogue. In "Soldier's Joy," Captain King, who has failed ever to make the promotion to Colonel, is detailing some of his other failures to PFC Hooper, who has recently lost his rank as Corporal and is, militarily, a loser of comparable gifts. King tells Hooper that he's allergic to alcohol.

"I used to think it was all for the best. I have an addictive personality and you can bet your bottom dollar I would have been a problem drinker. No question about it. But now I wonder. If I'd had one big weakness like that maybe I wouldn't have had all these little pissant weaknesses I ended up with. I know that sounds like bull-pucky, but look at Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great was a boozier. Did you know that?"

"No sir," Hooper said.

"Well, he was. Read your history. So was Churchill. Churchill drank a bottle of cognac a day. And of course Grant. You know what Lincoln said when someone complained about Grant's drinking?"

"Yes sir. I've heard the story."

"He said, 'Find out what brand he uses so I can ship a case to the rest of my generals.' Is that the way you heard it?"

"Yes sir."

Quoting that passage reminds me of another of Tobias Wolff's strengths: his ability to show readers the U.S. Army during the era of the Vietnam War and after. Wolff ranks with Andre Dubus and Tim O'Brien as a first-rate chronicler of the American military during those years.

I also enjoyed Charles D'Ambrosio's *The Point*.⁵ He's got a sense of humor that summons to mind Flannery O'Connor. Indeed, the spiritual situations in many of his stories strongly remind me of O'Connor's fictive wrestlings with grace, and his mixture of humor and horror produces the same *frisson*—"the Grotesque"—that made the Southern Prophet's work distinctive. To wit, the opener of my favorite piece from this collection, "Her Real Name":

The girl's scalp looked as though it had been singed by fire—strands of thatchy red hair snaked away from her face, then settled against her skin, pasted there by sweat and sunscreen and the blown grit and dust of travel. For a while her thin hair had remained as light and clean as the down of a newborn chick, but it was getting hotter as

⁴ BACK IN THE WORLD, by Tobias Wolff. Vintage Contemporaries. \$12.00p.

⁵ THE POINT, by Charles D'Ambrosio. Little, Brown. \$19.95.

they drove west, heading into a summer-long drought that scorched the landscape, that withered the grass and melted the black tar between expansion joints in the road and bloated like balloons the bodies of raccoon and deer and dog and made everything on the highway ahead ripple like a mirage through waves of rising heat. Since leaving Fargo, it had been too hot to wear the wig, and it now lay on the seat between them, still holding within its webbing the shape of her head.

And the story only gets better from there. D'Ambrosio should be a name to reckon with in the new millennium, particularly once he grows far enough away from his literary mentors to speak in his own voice. For my part, I'll be on the lookout for future books by this young man.

Two of the recent books I read fall into the science fiction/fantasy category. Once, I was an avid reader of this genre of literature, but now I seem unable to suspend my disbelief sufficiently really to enjoy it (with the exception of certain books by Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen King, P.D. James, and a couple of other mostly mainstream writers). Nevertheless, for those who like raunchy & raucous sci-fi—for, perhaps, those children of *Hudson Review* subscribers who might be reading this—I can recommend Lance Olsen's *Time Famine*.⁶ It has an opening premise sure to tick off most liberals over forty: a post-nuclear holocaust theme park named BelsenLand. You got it: this is a Virtual Holocaust Museum in what used to be Los Angeles, California.

He hurried by the Lampshade One-Stop. Near its entrance three bony construction workers dressed as bony prisoners (highest-paid employees in BelsenLand, needing as they did to maintain that emaciated look week after week, month after month, their existences adding up to a bland string of illegally obtained lettuce leaves, Christian Dior bottled water, and what seemed like meter-long lines of cocaine) pickaxed the lane, breaking ground for a new holographic info-display pedestal while feigning the tribulations of hard concentration-camp labor for the guests.

I couldn't endure the mostly adolescent humor of this book for its entire 324 pages, but, then, I'm not an adolescent any more either. I don't think I'd much like Anthony Burgess' *Clockwork Orange* nowadays, either, but I once thought it was a real *horrorshow*.

The other entrant in the fantasy category is Jonathan Carroll's *The Panic Hand*.⁷ Carroll's prose trips along so pleasantly, I kept longing to read a realistic story by the guy. But, no. Imaginary friends had to come to life, one of God's thirty-six *parts* (you have to read "Uh-Oh City" to

⁶ TIME FAMINE, by Lance Olsen. Permeable Press. \$12.95p.

⁷ THE PANIC HAND, by Jonathan Carroll. St. Martin's Press. \$23.95.

figure that out) had to descend from heaven to tell a middle-aged academic about the fate of the world, and so on and forth. I'm too old for this, just like I'm too old for Andrew Lloyd Webber. However, if you happen to be someone who likes Mark Helprin, you'll probably like Jonathan Carroll too. Enjoy yourself.

A book that wasn't in the fantasy/sci-fi category but probably should have been is A.N. Wilson's *A Watch in the Night*.⁸ Admittedly, I haven't read the other books in the Lampitt family saga, of which this is the latest installment, but this story certainly didn't stand on its own merits for me. I found it the most self-indulgent of all the narcissistic novels on this year's list. Its most fantastic conceit is Shakespearean: Shakespeare appears as *God* in this novel. Actually, it's more a case of literary borderline personality—the narrator of *Watch*, a fiftyish failed actor and somewhat successful biographer, envisions Will “watching over” him and recording all of his actions. This narrator, Julian Ramsey, merges his identity with the Bard's, but it is, in my opinion, a bad deal for the Bard.

Wilson, of course, is right in line with the Shakespeare mania of the 1990s. My guess is that he had a good course on the Renaissance poet/playwright when he was an undergrad, because everything one might learn in such a course is run out for the reader. Ramsey has an affair with a Dark Lady and is betrayed by a Young Man. For the unlettered, who may not be able to figure out this triangle, Wilson quotes the sonnets liberally. Every smidgen of biographical info (there isn't much) on Shakespeare trots across the stage, I mean, the page. Did Francis Bacon or William DeVere write Shakespeare's plays? No way. Wilson trashes those theories, as do all true lovers of the One and Only Bard of Avon.

A Watch in the Night might be a great book for Shakespeare aficionados or dreamy grad students in English Lit., but I found it a bit precious and tiresome. Indeed, the whole Shakespeare Industry kind of baffles me, much as I love the plays and poetry. I guess I'd be more interested in a novel that made Christopher Marlowe into the omnipotent viewer of the narrative, or Ben Jonson, or some anonymous boy who acted in a few plays and then succumbed to the Black Plague that ravaged London in 1603. But, alas, few wish to write about such unknown shapers of history. It's like New Agers who believe in reincarnation. How often do they believe they were dirt-daubed illiterate clods in their past lives? Almost never. Instead, they recognize themselves in Cleopatra, or Aristotle, or Catherine the Great, or . . . William Shakespeare. How conceited can we get? If Will *were* watching over this nineties Bardomania, he'd no doubt be horrified by the narcissism of our era, by the authors and actors who have cathected him as *The Literary Object*, as part of themselves and subject, therefore, to every creative indignity they can think up.

Theatre reviewers and other culture vultures talk about Olivier's

⁸ A WATCH IN THE NIGHT, by A. N. Wilson. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. \$23.00.

Hamlet, or Gibson's Hamlet, or Branagh's Hamlet, but I'd love to see this standard inverted—how about “Shakespeare's Branagh”? Great actor, Kenny B., but who—what—is he? Just a man, a man strutting his stuff on the world's stage for the few brief hours and weeks allotted him by time. Even the celluloid frames holding his image will fade eventually, a fact that William Shakespeare seemed to understand better than any of his current admirers. Even A.N. Wilson sort of grasps this, I think. The last page of his novel contains two of its truest lines: “Lives of plants and lesser mammals simply go. It is only a fiction that our lives are any different.”

Well, speaking of going, I'd rather have a more upbeat ending for this Chronicle, so let me turn to a novel that I really did enjoy—Rita Ciresi's *Blue Italian*.⁹ Ciresi's got a mouth, as they say in the Italian neighborhoods around where I live. She tells it like it is and, man, is she *funny*. Ciresi knows that every tragedy is laced with humor and she pours it on like poison over lady fingers. Delightful. Tasty. You'll die laughing, from Rosa's first glimmerings of tragedy (“Was it love—or just plain paranoia—that had crazed Rosa into mistaking a massive tumor for another woman?”) to her final musings that even cheap consumer goods survive a human life (“The drugstore always had been Gary and Rosa's downfall. Turn them loose in the Rexall and within two minutes they could blow a hundred bucks—Gary on stuff to clear his sinuses and Rosa on products to either clog or jog her intestines”). This is a funny book about cancer, oxymoronic though that sounds. Its main characters, Rosa and Gary, made me care about them, and laugh with them. Unlike the other novels I read that featured whiny poseurs as main characters, *Blue Italian* featured two believably flawed humans facing death with the only real weapon any of us has: a sense of humor. *Brava*, Ms. Ciresi.

⁹ BLUE ITALIAN, by Rita Ciresi. The Ecco Press. \$22.00.

SONYA RUDIKOFF

“You Made Me Love You!”

LOOKING THROUGH GLOSSY MAGAZINES OR NEWSPAPERS, a reader will be amazed by the advertisements for the new clothing of Armani or Krizia or Sonia Rykiel. The models are good-looking, although extremely thin; they wear their hair in stark unattractive styles, and they look so angry, so victimized by the clothes or the photographer that it is hard to think someone would believe these images would convey the desirability of the clothes or the allure of the women posing in them. The ideal woman has a sour look on her face, a petulant and sullen expression, standing there like a rebellious adolescent impatient to get away. And the young men in the ads also have an angry look, perhaps because no one gave them time to shave. Indeed, the number of men who appear unshaven in their Armani suits is quite surprising. It is, however, the look of the day. Are these models, these clothes, those positions in which they present themselves—*alluring*? Or is that word even appropriate?

Someone with the power to control the vocabulary of visual images, or a number of people, determine that this is what we shall see. “Allure” is the name of a Chanel perfume, and, amusingly enough, also the name of a beauty and fitness magazine. As a noun denoting the intensity of compelling attraction, “allure” has admittedly been debased in modern usage. Even as a verb it has a used or soiled air. Like “glamour,” the word has been vulgarized, it can be summoned only when speaking of Marlene Dietrich, or the stars of the silent screen. Colette spoke in that tone of La Belle Otero and other great courtesans. It was ineffable “glamour” which sold the photographs of nineteenth-century English upper-class women in the shops. Nothing is stranger than to encounter the representatives of “allure” from an earlier day—the smile that was once thought compelling, the harsh manliness, the reserved or hidden self that spoke worlds, the capricious behavior that was charming, the cool and distant air that was thought “distingué.” Old songs evoke the feeling of the past, of a succession of past personal styles of allure. As Baudelaire said, “*Chaque époque a son port, son regard, sa sourire.*”

“Allure” suggests the beautiful and mysterious women of history exerting their charm and desirability. Or men of the past, with their ineluctable power. The allure of characters in novels or plays is documented by the reactions of those around them. Thus, in *Emma*, Mr. Knightley has a certain masculine allure, Emma is captivated by it, as she is aware of the allure of Mr. Elton, but Emma’s allure is in her independence and her fortune. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Gilbert Osmond

seems to have radiated allure for Isabel Archer, when she first knew him, but not for the reader. *Her* allure also involves independence and a fortune. In fact, the portrayal of allure or alluring characters in books, or the subjective experience of allure is not Professor Hersey's subject. In this inquiry, Hersey, an art historian at Yale, looks at the cultural objects through which allure has been expressed or negotiated, but his interest is not in the themes of allure, not the content of the experience of allure, but the operation of it.¹ Inside the word "allure" is to be seen "lure" and, by extension, seduction, luring, trapping, baiting. It is this process which captures Hersey's interest. His pursuit of his subject may be understood better in terms of a catalogue of L.L. Bean's fishing or hunting equipment, or an Orvis display of the most effective flies and lures for the intrepid fisherman.

Allure, as Professor Hersey understands it, is the engine of sexual selection, and sexual selection requires a sexual typology. Cultures were producing art and idealized bodies long before there was any knowledge of reproduction, so it seems that the idea of what was alluring antedated its relation to the race, or the family system or even more primitive social kinds of organization. In the sexual climate of the present day, sexual selection has more than reproduction for its purpose but the drama of sexual selection can still be read in the art of the West and its ideals of proportion and body type. This well-trodden ground can still be covered in a new way or with a new perspective, as Hersey demonstrates with his extensive knowledge of Western art providing background, material, and questions for the exploration of selectability of body types. And then, there is the subtitle of his book, which certainly promises a new perspective: "Sexual Selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk."

The body has become a subject of urgent interest for our contemporaries, as it has been throughout civilized life. Most often today this means a body consciousness, and its implications for culture. Hersey's interest is in the way the body's ideal proportions evolved over the centuries according to certain canonical images of the most desirable, the most selectable, the most efficient for purposes of sexual pleasure. Most people were so isolated throughout so much of human history that their awareness of body types was equally limited. Developed communications, exploration, conquest, trade, commerce, the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, and then of Imperialism—over time, all these new enterprises brought the West into contact with hitherto unknown people and races. The Renaissance had renewed the knowledge of classical body types for those who had lost it, and strengthened the influence of the Polykleitan ideal, even as non-Polykleitan racial types were becoming more widely known.

The sculptures of the Greek masters, Polykleitos and Praxiteles, were

¹ THE EVOLUTION OF ALLURE: Sexual Selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk, by *George L. Hersey*. The MIT Press. \$30.00.

constructed on certain principles of measurement and proportion; the construction of allure then became quantifiable, as Hersey shows. The body's landmarks occur in specific numerical series. Leonardo, Vitruvius, and Alberti later systematized these relationships. Hersey investigates the agreement or disagreement of Alberti and other Renaissance writers with the Polykleitan ideal, that is, agreement in such things as the proportion of chest width to height, foot length to height, hand length, head height, and other relationships. Dürer was fascinated by these proportions and he appears to have constructed *Adam and Eve* according to such principles: nipples, navel, groin, knees and heels are placed in numerical sequence. In the mid-nineteenth century, the American sculptor William Wetmore Story was also fascinated by the possibility of geometrically constructing the body in art, and demonstrated it in his treatises and his sculptures.

Later ages continued to prefer these Polykleitan ideals even as the new science of physical anthropology introduced greater knowledge of non-Polykleitan bodies. Ideas about Aryanism and heroes spread through the intellectual world in the nineteenth century. In Sanskrit, "Aryan" meant "noble" and denoted the historic unproclaimed race of heroes. Friedrich Max Müller, the Oxford linguistics scholar, wrote on Aryan languages and influenced Carlyle, Froude and others. Writers such as Gobineau, Curtius, Galton, Huxley and Matthew Arnold are reviewed for their influential ideas about Hellenic, Hebraic or Semitic types. The cult of Aryanism, 1845–1895, was very popular: it "not only proposed parameters for ideal bodies and faces, it also advocated, more forcibly than did any Renaissance or baroque theory, that these ideals should serve as reproductive goals." Frederic Leighton, the influential and successful Victorian painter, joined in this discourse, with his luxuriant neoclassical pictures, beginning in the 1850s, as well as in his Addresses to the Royal Academy in the 1870s. Curiously, Leighton specifically spoke of Aryanism and Semitism in art and developed elaborate theories about the body types associated with the two. Thus, Etruscan art, and medieval art, such as the thirteenth-century madonnas of Cimabue, were proscribed in Leighton's intoxication with Aryan types.

The Victorians had developed a fear of race degeneration, a consciousness of race and the future of the races that seemed obsessive. What was inevitable, then, was the interest in ways to prevent the continuing degeneration of the race, such as a movement toward perfectability and control in sexual selection. This led inevitably to eugenics, which was a passion for the late Victorians and Edwardians. Many theorists and anthropologists were attracted to the subject before it became so inflammatory. Indeed, in earlier days, eugenics was usually combined with the love of nature and with socialism. Galton, however, does seem to have envisioned something like camps or labor colonies in which the unfit would be segregated from the fittest. The mild horrors

of eugenics pale of course beside the worse horrors of race ideology developed by the Nazis.

Hersey is especially interested in showing how the Italian anthropologist, Lombroso, and his disciple, Max Nordau, the late nineteenth-century social theorist, contributed to the discourse about racial typologies in art and literature. Lombroso researched criminals, Nordau art and artists. Lombroso found atavism and criminality widely distributed, even, for example, in the ornamentation and embroidery of the natural world. His disciple, Adolf Loos, the architect, then wrote the influential essay, "Ornament and Crime" (1908), condemning all *architectural* ornament as atavistic, thus ushering in the bare International Style. Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rossetti, Baudelaire, Wagner, and others were Lombroso's examples to substantiate theories about degeneration and cultural decline. Monet, the Impressionists, Rodin and Whistler were considered degenerate both as men and as artists, their fatal touch appearing in their lives, their choice of models, as well as their technical and plastic methods. Lombroso found degeneracy and atavism everywhere in modern art. It was the Nazis, however, as Hersey observes, whose totalitarianism made practical and explicit the goals of the theoretical speculations of Lombroso, Galton, and Nordau.

The modernism which seemed to these theorists so debased had abandoned the canonical body of Polykleitan models. Even when the body remained of interest, when the art was not abstract, as in some of the representational figure painting of our day, there was a loss of interest in the body's proportions which had guided the representation of the body from the fifth century B.C. to the beginning of the twentieth century, and thus had guided the prescription of allure. Proportionate relationships which once interested Leonardo, Michelangelo, Alberti and Dürer, had led them to the intensive study of human measurements, and to the related Pythagorean symbolism. Questions of space and the breakup of forms demanded the attention of modern artists. At the same time the body became uniquely interesting, in its more primitive aspect, as can be seen in, say, *Les Femmes d'Alger* and the art of the early twentieth century influenced by primitive art. Primitive forms were not elevated to the level of ideal types, however, because an entirely new way of conceiving of the body in space had become more urgent.

There may be a question about what all this has to do with the evolution of allure, but the reader should remain with Hersey's discussion and with his categories as he explores their implications. Hersey has argued that certain ideal physical types were established in Western bodily imagery as those most attractive, most selectable for ultimate (if unconscious) purposes of reproduction, and that this had implicitly guided the idealizing of physical types for twenty centuries. Since modernism, the task of measurement has fallen to those whose ideal types are cultivated for another purpose. Bodybuilders explicitly concern themselves with measurement, and with the pursuit of ideal

possibilities in their muscles. This may create grotesque figures, as in the distorting body shapes these athletes develop to surpass their competitors and predecessors. Whether it also develops qualities of allure remains a matter that must be settled by the bodybuilders, who may not exert their allure on anyone outside their group.² It is only with the decline of a typology governed by certain ideal proportions that some can break off to concentrate entirely on their own muscles, with no thought for the relation of their physicality to that of anyone else.

The swollen exaggerations of muscle which adorn their bodies do not put them into competition with *David* or *The Dying Slave*, and their classical proportions, but then the bodybuilders have another ideal of measurement if not proportion. Hersey's book ends with a consideration of this most bodily conscious group of our day. The art which presents the ideal types for bodybuilders is to be found in Marvel Comics' "The Incredible Hulk," and other examples of grossly hyper-developed musculature in both men and women shown in the specialist magazines devoted to this development. The art that comes closest to this strange display of expanded biceps, triceps and pectorals is, curiously, that of the pre-historic Venus images, the bulbous shapes of ancient art. This is where Hersey leaves the matter, returning to the images he offered at the beginning, presaging the Medici Venus, and her representation of allure.

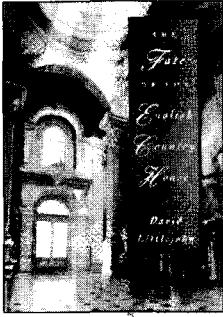
² These dogged professionals are to be distinguished from men and women who work out at a gym three times a week to achieve an improved sense of well-being.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID MASON spent the spring in Greece as a Fulbright Writer-in-Residence. . . . LOUIS SIMPSON's most recent books are *There You Are* (poems) and *The King My Father's Wreck* (memoirs)—both published by Story Line Press. . . . DANIEL HOFFMAN lectured on Emily Dickinson in May at the Institute of United States Studies, University of London. . . . GEORGE WATSON, who is Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, is the author of *The Literary Critics* (Chatto & Windus) and *Politics and Literature in Modern Britain* (St. Martin's). . . . R.S. GWYNN's most recent book is *The Advocates of Poetry: A Reader of American Poet-Critics of the Modernist Era*. . . . MARCIA B. SIEGEL gave a paper on "Lexicons for Movement Research" at the Colson Symposium in Theater and Performance Analysis, University of Bristol, in March. . . . JULIE KEITH's* first collection of stories, *The Jaguar Temple* (1994, Nuage Editions), was short-listed last year for the Governor-General of Canada Fiction Prize. . . . MADELEINE MYSKO teaches in The Writing Seminars of The Johns Hopkins University and is a recipient of an individual artist grant from the State of Maryland. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS is Professor of English in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. His last book of poems, *Breakdown Lane*, was finalist for The Poets' Prize.

MARK VINZ* is the author of several books of poems, most recently *Minnesota Gothic* (Milkweed Editions), as well as co-editor of *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry* (New Rivers Press). . . . JEROME MAZZARO lives in Buffalo, New York and has recently retired from teaching. . . . PATRICIA HOOPER's* new book of poems, *At the Corner of the Eye*, is due this year from Michigan State University Press. . . . NEAL BOWERS' nonfiction book, *Words for the Taking: The Hunt for a Plagiarist*, was released earlier this year. . . . D. NURKSE's latest book, *Voices over Water*, was re-issued by Four Way Books in 1996. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's study of gay life in twentieth-century America will be published next year by Henry Holt and Company. . . . BERT CARDULLO gave a talk titled "The Blue Rose of St. Louis: Laura, Romanticism, and *The Glass Menagerie*" at the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival in March 1997. . . . BRUCE BAWER is a columnist for *The Advocate* and the editor of *Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy*, the paperback edition of which will appear in 1997 from Touchstone. . . . JOHN HAINES is the author of numerous collections of poems and critical essays, of which the most recent are *Fables and Distances, New and Selected Essays* (1996), and *A Guide to the Four-Chambered Heart* (1996). . . . DEAN FLOWER is writing a monograph on John Updike for *American Writers: Retrospective Supplement* (Scribner's) due out in the fall. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest collection of poetry is *Questions for Ecclesiastes*. He is also co-editor of *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism* (Story Line Press) and co-author of *The Reaper Essays*. . . . SUSAN BALÉE's next contribution to this magazine will be a review of *A History of the Breast*.

*Asterisk indicates a new contributor.



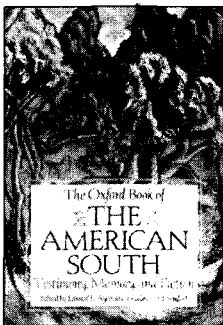
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IN THIS ISSUE:

For Emerson, everything was spiritualized—language a symbol of natural facts, nature a symbol of spirit, and evil merely the absence of good. Dickinson courageously accepted Emerson's heady challenge, though not his facile solutions. Rejecting the received pieties of her family's and community's religious observances, she sought revelation, insight, an original relation to her universe.

—Daniel Hoffman, "Emily Dickinson: The Heft of Cathedral Tunes," p. 206.

Around his house in Chelsea, the moral desperado was also in evidence. Here the witness is Jane Carlyle, who succinctly characterized Carlyle's physical and emotional state: "as usual, never healthy, never absolutely ill—protesting against 'things in general' with the old emphasis—with an increased vehemence just at present." This was in the 1840s, and things would only get worse when Carlyle embarked upon the deadening thirteen-year project of a life of Frederick the Great—Jane would die before he had completed it. "This man of mine will absolutely do nothing but write books and be sick," she had written earlier to John Foster, Dickens' biographer, . . .

—William H. Pritchard, "What to Do with Carlyle?," p. 245.

At its richest and most rewarding, the book [*Genesis: A Living Conversation*] shows men and women reflectively turning over the Genesis stories to articulate and examine critically the image of God presented in them, and to explore, in turn, the tensions that are thereby uncovered among their own differing visions of God and of the scripture's *dramatis personae*. Is God a God of perfect love or can God be hardhearted and destructive? . . . What *is* righteousness? What *is* the proper stance toward a God who, in these pages, is frankly murderous?

—Bruce Bawer, "In Our Beginnings," p. 311.